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# MEN *of* LETTERS

*By* DIXON SCOTT

With an Introduction by MAX BEERBOHM

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# MEN OF LETTERS

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DIXON SCOTT

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

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BY

## DIXON SCOTT

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

## MAX BEERBOHM

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MCMXXIII

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# EDITORIAL NOTE

It is peculiarly appropriate that such a series as The Bookman Library should begin with such a book as Dixon Scott's *Men of Letters*—a collection of essays about bookmen, which has already found a large and enthusiastic acceptance among booklovers. Moreover, the principal essays in this volume originally appeared in the pages of *The Bookman*, which values among its possessions a certain letter Scott wrote, shortly before he sailed for Gallipoli, saying he thought he never would have been able to write what he believed were the best things he had done "if *The Bookman* had not given me so much rope and been so patient with my weaknesses."

What he meant is soon explained; but, in any case, there was little virtue in that patience, for, in response, he was the most sincere and conscientious of workers. If you turn to the flyleaves at the beginning and end of books he reviewed, you will find them closely covered with notes in his small, neat, but not easily decipherable hand; nor was he satisfied that his articles and reviews should be written from a full knowledge of his subject—he gave all his mind and heart to the writing of them, with a sensitive feeling for the magic of words, a love of adequate and vivid language, and was so tireless in polishing and refining his sentences that he could not bear to part with his manuscript till he was as nearly satisfied with it as one so self-critical could be.

Limits, in the matter of length, were always imposed upon him, but he could seldom keep within them. When he was writing the Bernard Shaw essay, now in this volume, rather late in the day and after editorial promptings, he began to send it in by instalments of five hundred to a thousand words at a time. The stipulated length being considerably exceeded and the end not yet in sight, an imperative letter insisted on his finishing off in another five hundred words. Another five hundred came, with an apology because it was not the end, and, in despair, something more than half the article was printed with an announcement that it would be concluded next month. In this way an essay that was to have made not more than 5,000 words ran to about 14,000. There was similar difficulty with the Henry James article. He kept this more to the required length, but it arrived in small instalments, and, at the eleventh hour, on his pledge that there should be only another five hundred words, the number of *The Bookman* was made up and space left for this. Next day, as that final fragment did not arrive, a telegram went to him: "Unless completion here to-morrow shall finish article myself." Thereupon, he took the long journey from Market Harborough to London early the following morning and delivered his copy, anxious to be assured he was in time.

And when, after his death, one learned how he used to slave on those articles, working at them far into the night, with the quiet of the sleeping countryside all about him, keen to let no slipshod phrasing, no incommensurate expression of his meaning pass from under his hand—how, when the thing baffled him, the rest of the household, long abed, would hear him go softly downstairs, hear him walk restlessly for half an hour in the darkness of the garden, thinking out what he wanted to say and how he could best say it, then come softly in upstairs and back to his task again—one regretted that telegram.

First published in 1916, *Men of Letters* won immediate recognition for Dixon Scott as perhaps the most brilliant, certainly the most promising, of the younger essayists and literary critics of his day, and its reception by the public was no less significant. Now out of print in its earlier form, it is, for the reasons given, re-issued (with one additional essay, that on Whitman) as the first volume in THE BOOKMAN LIBRARY, though this series is to consist chiefly of new books that are being specially written for it and will only occasionally include reprints of desirable books that are not otherwise obtainable.

A. ST. J. A.

## EDITORIAL NOTE TO FIRST EDITION

SOME time before the War, the late Mr. Dixon Scott arranged to publish a collection of his essays and literary criticisms, and after his death at Gallipoli it was felt that it was due to his memory that the plan he had left unfinished should be carried through. He had drastically revised and largely rewritten six of the principal essays, and amongst his papers were found various tentative lists of others he had thought of including in a volume which he proposed to entitle "Men of Letters." Most of the essays named in his lists have been brought together in these pages. Four have been added (Sir W. Robertson Nicoll, Mrs. Meynell, C. E. Montague, and Rupert Brooke), for the selection of which the present editor is responsible. The six on Shaw, Barrie, Kipling, Houghton, Granville Barker, and William Morris are the only essays that have received final revision at the hand of their author; the rest are reprinted from the periodicals in which they originally appeared.

Because of certain opinions Dixon Scott had expressed privately and in his writings, it was felt that nothing could be more fitting than that his book, published in such circumstances, should have an Introduction by Mr. Max Beerbohm, and this Mr. Beerbohm most kindly consented to write. He confessed, on reading a set of proofs, that he would feel rather more comfortable if the essay on himself were omitted, but added that if its inclusion had formed part of Dixon Scott's own plan for his book, then he would not urge a personal wish against it but "accept the situation." Therefore, and because the essay is peculiarly characteristic of Scott's work, the editor has ventured to retain it.

A. St. J. A.

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# INTRODUCTION

A YEAR ago it would have been a pleasure to write something in appreciation of Dixon Scott's work. The more you admire a man's writing the gladder are you that he should receive—for all good writers seem to be modest, and pleased with praise—whatever poor tribute you can offer him. But to review the book of a man at the outset of his career is a very different task from writing an "introduction" to that book when he is dead. Dixon Scott was born in July, 1881, and died in October of last year. And my sense of our loss is proportionate to my admiration for his work. I feel it to be an immense loss.

Many others there are who mourn him as a friend also—as a man of fine and very lovable character, they say. Such a man is indeed easily discernible throughout these pages. But it is likely that the reader will wish to know more of him by direct evidence; and I wish that the sad privilege of writing here about his work had fallen to someone who knew him and could describe him.

The main facts of his life, as I have learned them, are few and simple enough. He was the only son of John and Margaret (Dixon) Scott. He was educated at Breeze Hill, Walton. He was for some years clerk in a bank at Liverpool. Later, he was awarded a fellowship in the University of that city, and received much kindness and encouragement from Professor Elton. He might have had an altogether academic

career, but preferred to be a journalist. He returned to the home of his parents at Marston Trussell, near Market Harborough; and it was there that he did all his work. He wrote a weekly article about books for *The Liverpool Courier*, whose editor, Mr. Macleay, had been one of the first to appreciate his gifts. He wrote also many signed reviews for *The Manchester Guardian*. Mr. C. E. Montague, Mr. A. N. Monkhouse, and other pillars of that classic journal, were his friends. From London the keen eye of Sir William Robertson Nicoll discerned him, and soon he was contributing essays in criticism to *The Bookman*. Rather to his friends than to him it seemed a shame that his work should all be buried away dispectedly in the files of periodicals. He was persuaded to make a selection, to make a book. He began this task early in 1914, but, since he was as searching and sensitive a critic of himself as of others, I daresay he would not quickly have accomplished it even if the world's history had pursued its normal course and laid no new great claim on his spirit. So soon as 1914 had shown itself in its true colours, the personal task he had been working at must have seemed to him negligible enough. Anyhow, it was unfinished when he, a Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery, sailed for Gallipoli. It was on October 2nd of last year that he landed there. And on the 23rd of that month he died of dysentery, aboard a hospital ship.

In the manner of his death, in the fact that such a brain as his stopped and was lost to us not by force of some random shell or bullet from the human enemy, but by operation of Nature on a frame that had never been robust, one may find—or not—a melancholy consolation. In any case, it is not he, save for what physical sufferings he may have had before death, that we need pity. Sympathy is never needed by the unknowing

dead, and should be kept rather for those who held them dear, and have lost them, and live. Many a bereavement in this war will have been the more bitter for the knowledge that the lost one had in him something that, in future days of peace, would have had a great outcome, surely. Not the least tragic thought that besets men in 1916 is that the toll taken is, in the strictest sense, incalculable. Among the very young lives laid down there may—we shall never know—have been a Shakespeare, a Newton, a far greater than Mr. Pitt, a far greater than whom you will. Not quite so sad is it to think of those who were old enough to have done, to have given, already something of what was in them to do and give. I think the readers of this book will find that Dixon Scott was one who had given, according to his bent, much already.

"Will find" I say. It may be that in Manchester and in Liverpool his work was well-known and appreciated, and his death widely mourned. I am inclined to believe that provincial cities are, in matters of literature and journalism, and in other matters, fresher and more receptive than London is. I know only London. And, well though I happen to know it, I was, when Dixon Scott died, surprised at the fewness of the people—I mean the quite specifically bookish and paperish people—who were aware that Dixon Scott had lived. Much of his best work had been in *The Bookman*, duly signed—the essays on Henry James and Mr. Shaw and Mr. Kipling, for example. Strange, to me, that any one reading them could have forgotten the writer's name and them! There are on the London press many brilliant critics of books; but the total effulgence is not so utterly blinding as to leave me unastonished that Dixon Scott's light was distinct to so very few. I infer that in London a writer, until he has been a great deal written about, has no chance of a reputation even among those who are keen on reading. Dixon Scott's

work was (in form) journalism; and journalists are not encouraged by editors to write about one another. Had he been a writer of books, and had these contained but a tithe of the quality he showed in his articles, he would have won quick enough fame even in the metropolis, I fancy. I don't say that his failure to do so was, for him, regrettable. A young artist who sets the Thames on fire is very apt to singe his own fingers. Obscurity, if he has ambition of a worldly kind, is a spur, and doesn't irk him if he hasn't. I gather from report that Dixon Scott had no worldly ambition but to earn enough for bread and butter. But, though he seems to have been indifferent to fame, he was not, I happen to know, ungrateful for a little praise; and I wish he had had rather more of it from that "royal city of romance," as London appeared to him, "towering tremendously above the level of the shires."

Much of the charm of his writing—the freshness, the vigorous youngness of it—is due to his having been a provincial. He was not unconscious of an advantage in being so. "A Londoner," he wrote, in another criticism than that from which I have just quoted, "sees life at an angle, foreshortened, as from a stage-box; instead of taking to it gradually, breast on, from the primitive beach, every step an adventure, he nips into it aslant, deep water at once, from the door of his sophisticated bathing-van—a solid half of experience irrecoverably missed." And elsewhere he wrote, in like vein, that provincialism "teaches an artist proportion and perspective, teaches him humility, persuades him, above everything, to that wordless belief in something finer than he has ever experienced." Without wishing to be pedantic, I should demur that provincialism and humility are not inseparable. It all depends. I have known provincials to be very aggressive, very pragmatical and cocksure, and have been sure that

metropolitan birth would have softened them. But certain it is that if a man *has* the rare gift of humility, the provinces are the best place for it to thrive in.

Dixon Scott had this gift in ample measure; and it was the very core of his power. Not by humility alone can we critics excel; but the more we have of it, the better. Gone are the days when we dared bench ourselves aloft to acquit or condemn, according to a fixed code of laws, the shivering artist in the dock. Many of us, no doubt, would like to go on doing this; but wouldn't the laughter in court be unquenchable if we did? We may cast a wistful quarterly glance at that motto which still adorns the cover of *The Edinburgh Review*; but well we know that it is no longer a question of the judge being condemned if the guilty man is let off: the judge was condemned long ago on his own demerits. There is a letter in which Miss Charlotte Brontë wrote of her trepidation in meeting, at a dinner given for that purpose by her publisher, three leading critics. One can imagine them—grave, bald, whiskered men in broad-cloth, peering through their spectacles at the little woman of genius, and wondering whether she would be able to prove her innocence; immensely grave and self-important gentlemen, and yet—had they and she but known it—ghosts, empty and pathetic survivals from another century. At the coming of the romantic school in literature, at the passing of the classical school, the old criticism had ceased to exist; but it didn't know this; nobody knew this. It was in quite recent times that people, looking back, realized that the current judicial criticism of literature in the nineteenth century had been one long series of awful "howlers." The immediate result of this discovery was the laying of the ghost that had stalked and gibbered so long. The way was now clear for living criticism—criticism adaptable to the quality of its sub-

ject matter. Not that this was a new kind of criticism. Sensitive Lamb and eager Hazlitt were of the past, chronologically; and they had had imitative successors. But only now was it generally recognized that their method was the most trustworthy and the best; that the critic was not the superior of the creative artist; that his duty was not to dictate, but to understand and suggest; that he had, in fine, no right to wear a full-bottomed wig and looked very well in a peaked cap with INTERPRETER round the front of it.

Let those of us critics who chafe at the comparative modesty of their head-gear take comfort in the thought that they are very much more interesting to themselves and to others than the old Judges ever were. Long robes and ermine may have been gratifying to their wearers, but were incompatible with any natural freedom of movement, and smothered all individuality. Nowadays the critic is free to be actively himself. It is always pleasant to be that, and always worth while to watch any one being that. Of course the degree of interest and pleasure taken in watching a critic be himself is greater or less according to what sort of self his is. A fussily obtrusive self diminishes the pleasure; a languid self abates the interest. Never for a moment will you find Dixon Scott consciously interposing his "ego" or in any way bothering about it. Not the less is he always a self-revealing writer; and the revealed is consistently charming and engaging. As for languor, I daresay that the more rest-loving of his readers will sigh, now and again in the course of his pages, for a touch in him of that defect. They may wish he went a little more slowly and quietly. I agree that his manner is sometimes open to the charge of boisterousness. But let it be remembered that in writing for the press a man does not—or at any rate should not—write in exactly the tone he would use in writing a book, and that most

of these articles were written for daily newspapers. An article in a daily newspaper has this in common with a "turn" in a music-hall: to make any effect at all, to "carry," it must be done with a certain sharpness of "attack." Dixon Scott knew this well, as you may see by what he says of the journalist's need to transform "the quiet essay into the alert, immediate article"; and you may be sure that had he lived he would have restored these articles to the form in which he (literary by nature, journalistic by circumstances) first conceived them in his mind. The articles that he had actually revised were the longer ones, the elaborate ones, which had appeared mostly in *The Bookman*. Collating the final text with the original, I find it was precisely this process of restoration that he aimed at—and achieved. For the rest, his boisterousness is never of that kind —that Futuristic kind—which doesn't strike one as having a corresponding vitality to back it up. There is always behind it a strong-rushing current of thought and feeling.

One often wonders which of these two things, the power to feel strongly and the power to think strongly, plays the greater part in the making of fine criticism. Feeling, of course, comes first in point of time. First the surrender to a work of art, the sensitive delight in it and passionate absorption of it. There are critics who never get beyond that stage—and very good critics too, many of them; but incomplete. We are grateful to them for having rapture and for passing it on to us; but we want to know *why* they and we are in such ecstasies. In other words, a critic ought to be able to use his brain as well as his heart. Dixon Scott kept a powerful and subtle brain working at high pressure for us. You will find nothing tentative in these pages, and nothing left to chance. Before he put pen to paper, he always knew what he was

about; he had always gone to the root of his subject, grasped the whole range of it. It is true that in every essay he seems to be setting out breathlessly on a wild and mysterious adventure fraught with all manner of difficulties and perils which he will not disguise from you, his companion. But you need have no fear. He knows the way. He has been over all the ground. He knows just where the goal is, and will punctually set you down there.

Sometimes, perhaps, he leads you by some path not because it is a short cut, but just because it is rocky and precipitous. Belonging very much to the age he lived in, Dixon Scott had a delight in paradoxes. It may be that a hundred years hence our typical writers will all seem to have been a little mad, just as the typical writers of the eighteenth century seem all to have been a little dull. But in the best of those bygone writers one sees that the dullness is a mere mannerism: it does not affect for us the excellence of their work. Nor can I imagine that any discerning person who may read Dixon Scott's book in the twenty-first century will be much disturbed by the parodoxes —many of which, by the way, are solid truths, and all of them mere incidents in the exposition of some general truth.

I know not whether to admire more the wide "synthetic sweep" of his mind or the truly exquisite subtlety he had in analysis. Certainly, no other English critic has had such an ear as Dixon Scott had for the vibrations of "style" in literature, or has been able to analyse so minutely, with such unerring science, the technical peculiarities of this or that man's writing. In the essays on Mr. Shaw, Mr. Kipling, Mr. C. E. Montague and many others, you will find done, done perfectly, something which has hardly been even attempted by any one else. Dixon Scott said of

Rossetti that he "loved the very feel of language." This is equally true of himself. And in him, together with the sensuous delight, there was a quite dry clear understanding of the smallest component parts of what he had to deal with—such knowledge as engineers have of engines.

The gift for writing well is a casual gift. As often as not, men of powerful intellect, and of deep feeling, have no gift for playing the fiddle. Just as often have they no gift for writing. Many good fiddlers are fools, and there are many fools who (strange though it may seem) can through written words express their folly with ease, lucidity, and grace. The people most sensitive to music, and most learned in it, have often no executive talent at all; nor does it follow that because he loves and understands good literature a man is not liable to be a duffer so soon as he takes pen in hand. Luckily Nature did not withhold from Dixon Scott the specific gift for writing. She endowed him with it in all abundance. When I began to read the proof-sheets of this book, I noted for quotation passages that seemed to me specially brilliant in their verbal felicity; but they were soon so numerous that I had to close my list. At whatever page you open this book you will find some of those felicities.

Multitudinous though they are, they have something of the preciousness of rarity; for there will be no more of them. The greater your pleasure in these pages, the greater, necessarily, is your sense of what is lost, and the more sadly will you ponder over what, had he come safely through the war, Dixon Scott would have done with his genius. Would he, for all his humility, have been content to go on writing about other people? Would he, who was so creative in his criticism, not have been impelled from within to use his imagination and insight, his humour and wisdom,

in a purely creative form? One cannot tell. Between creative criticism and creation there is a frontier, almost imperceptible though it be; and Dixon Scott might or might not have crossed it. He wrote verses when he was very young. Some of these I have been allowed to see. They do not seem to have more than usual merit. In later years he meditated a novel, but this he did not actually write. (*Zarya*, a novel published some years ago, was by another writer whose name, oddly enough, is Dixon Scott.) It is likely that the strength of his critical faculty would have hampered him in creative work: watched by himself so narrowly at every step, he could hardly not have faltered. I am inclined to think that his future lay along the path he was already treading. It was hoped by his friends, and by any one who appreciated his work, that he would one day be able to shake off those fetters of journalism which, though he trod so buoyantly in them, must have galled him. One cannot read his longer and more important essays without wishing they were longer still—were indeed whole books, vessels to hold *all* that there so evidently was to be poured in. One wishes he had been free to write not always essays about the work of this or that man, but books about whole periods and schools. One regrets that he had to concern himself always with writers of his own time. Of his subjects in this book, Browning and Morris alone were not alive when he wrote about them. Yet how many in English literature are the men, and groups of men, about whom Dixon Scott should have discoursed to us!

It may be that he preferred, and would always have preferred, to appraise rather the living or the recently dead than those whose writings had already been sifted, and their positions fixed with more or less finality, by Time. For it is clear that the adventurous

spirit in him delighted in ways that had not been made smooth—ways where risks were to be run and queer things to be discovered and new horizons to be hailed.

Well, the adventurous spirit urged him, in due season, to a more impersonal errand, wherein a greater glory was to be won. And, as he was not destined to return, this book, that was to have been a writer's first-fruits, is offered by other hands as his memorial.

MAX BEERBOHM.

# THE INNOCENCE OF BERNARD SHAW

*"Let him beware of his damned century; his gifts of insane chivalry and animated narration are just those that might be slain and thrown out like an untimely birth by the Dæmon of the Epoch."*—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, *in a Letter.*

*"He is perhaps a 'fraud,' as the Americans put it; but the first victim of Bernard Shaw's charlatanism is Bernard Shaw himself. Susceptible to impressions (as are all artists) and a philosopher at the same time, he cannot do otherwise than deceive himself."*—AUGUSTE RODIN, *in a Conversation.*

WHEN part of this impression first appeared (in a special number of *The Bookman*) it was hailed as "a brilliant attack." I want to say at once that it is only a diffident defence. Quite simply and sincerely, with a strong sense of presumption, it comes forward to make excuses for our most mordant accuser; it is an honest attempt to discover the cause of the disparity between Mr. Shaw's superb powers and his performances, between the work he might have done for us—the work he wanted to do for us—and the work he has actually done; and as it gropes and taps sympathetically it does come delightedly on evidence which seems to prove overwhelmingly that the real villain of the piece is—not the author of *Androcles*—but that wasteful, wanton mocker whose present alias is The Life Force, which actually completed its frustration of Mr. Shaw's career by sardonically setting him to work to sing its praises. There is something positively conspiratorial in the cunning logic of events which drove this splendid Irishman astray; he was plucked about like a puppet

—torn out of his true place—crammed when still young and tender into an inappropriate mould, and held there while circumstances, with a diabolical deftness, screwed the die down on his features ineffaceably; and his very air of arrogance, which makes this description sound absurd, was but one of the imprints received in that hour. That the man whose deepest desire is to heal and help humanity should have become a kind of byword for mockery; that his altruism should seem egotism, his earnestness insolence, his mysticism materialism, his refusal to have living creatures slaughtered for his food a symptom, not of warm-heartedness, but of cold-bloodedness; that the man whose only quarrel with Christianity is its acquired element of cruelty, and who has preached and practised constantly an absolutely saintly code of private conduct and the strictest obedience to the Church's hardest rules, should yet be regarded as a dangerous enemy of morals and reproved (as he was by *The Times* itself in a leader on *Androcles and the Lion*) for ribaldry and irreverence in regard to sacred things: all these and their hundred kindred contradictions are explained when we watch his career from the beginning and perceive the frightful dexterity with which fate has always employed his best qualities to drive him along a road that must distort them. We shall find the essential Shaw to be eager, idealistic, impulsive, romantic. We shall see him flung, at exactly the most impressionable hour of his life, into the peculiarly priggish and self-assertive little world of the intellectual London of the eighties. We shall see how his native eagerness and inexperience idealized that environment; and how his wit and his vividness and his love of picturesqueness urged and enabled him to reproduce all its elements in a single concentrated pose; and how the accent he then adopted, the

attitudes he struck as he hectored the world from rebel platforms, ate back into his instincts and affected his habit of mind, until at length intolerance, arrogance, contentiousness, contradictiousness, became instinctively his imagination's weapons. And finally we shall see how his very earnestness and craving for consistency forced him on to the concoction of a philosophy which would justify his policy of pert exasperation; and how he gradually perfected a theory which represented irritation as the only open sesame to men's consciousness, and cold clear thinking as the weapon now most needed to cut us free from our pampering illusions, and which therefore laid on the man of genius as his deepest duty this thankless task of challenge and contempt. And we shall watch this adventitious creed drinking up vitality from his veins, dilating till at last it shut *him* in—trapped in a dense grove of ideas that slowly altered him until he matched them—as dungeon walls will do a captive. . . .

## PART I

### I

The whole thing, put abruptly, is another example of the tyranny of technique over temperament—of the way an instrument invented for too narrow a need will react on the fingers that use it, stiffening and striking back till it fatally deforms them, wrenching their special talent awry. The "tyranny of technique over temperament" may sound, indeed, just at first, a predicament as purely academic as the famous "deduction killed by a fact"; but really it is far fuller of ringing human comedy, of thrills, and alarums and poetry, than even the most dramatic of all the existing portraits of Shaw, the most exciting of the alternative estimates. The man's contradictions

—his literary licentiousness and his personal restraint—his intellectual voracity and his physical vegetarianism—the intense earnestness and benevolence of his real aims and ideals and the daft capers he cuts as he preaches them—have inspired any number of vivid interpretations, all of them with at least the life of paradox; but the best of them by far, much the noblest and the neatest, is the one which seizes all these contrasts—the austerity and the perversity, the inverted altruisms, the harangues and the humility, the general wild lack of all resemblance between reputation and reality—and thereupon presents him as a martyr who twice over and more has sacrificed the hard-won crown of martyrdom, its impressiveness, its reward of dignity—a prophet who has disguised himself as a jester to gain an audience for his message, staining his sackcloth to look like motley, only to find that his frantic jokes, invented so feverishly, simply exasperate his listeners instead of luring them—that they regard his levity as ill-timed, his solemn touches as sacrilegious, and the texts which they feel his pranks profane, and which they had hitherto accepted unsuspiciously, as being rendered henceforward and for ever quite unfitted for respectable family consumption. This conception of his last martyrdom, as might be expected, is naturally the one Mr. Shaw favours himself. "My case is really that of Rabelais over again," he has said. "In order to gain a hearing it was necessary for me to attain the footing of a privileged lunatic, with the licence of a jester. My method has therefore been to take the utmost trouble to find the right thing to say and then say it with the utmost levity. And all the time the real joke is that I am in earnest."

But there is a realler joke than that, and a very much richer. That's the merest drop-scene: the true Comedy lies behind. Another second and we will

ring the curtain up. Your deliberate martyr, after all, no matter how he fails, has a certain splendour that makes the Comic Spirit feel respectful; and the more undignified Shaw became for the sake of a high purpose, the more dignified would he actually appear. It is not futility, it is fatuity, that legitimates laughter; and in Shaw's case the fun only really begins when we see that this self-sacrifice was quite unintentional, that the martyrdom which he now mentions with such a brave lightness and sad pride was not only a mistaken policy, but actually quite a mistake. It was to cook his own dinner that he kindled the fire that turned and tortured him. He went to Smithfield because he thought it a good market-place. The entire proceeding was a practical joke lazily played on an overeager young innocent by the world he imagined he was taking firmly in hand. His "disguise" was a dress he slipped on as unsuspectingly as a man whose clothes have been changed overnight; and when he began to skip about in it like "a privileged lunatic" (a mad mixture of harlequin and hermit), it was he who was the dupe, not society. . . .

And if some one suggests (as some one ought to do) that no practical joke fails so wretchedly as the one that entirely succeeds, we can still defend, with quiet dignity, our present proposal for a few minutes' mirth. It is true, indeed, that the game *has* gone rather far—that the joke of Shaw thinking of himself as the joker when he was actually the victimized jokee, proves after all to have been made at our expense. If it had been merely a case of a mediocrity smirking self-satisfied when he ought to be feeling subdued, like an actor persuading himself that his involuntary tumble was a brilliant impromptu, then we might chuckle unchecked, undeterred by any danger of hurting the hero's complacency, and thank-

fully accepting his absurdity as his real contribution to the play. But this performer is such a fine one, his powers are so extraordinary, that any illusion he may suffer from, any mistake he may make, is immeasurably our loss. Our damned century has tripped him up, as Stevenson foretold, and that is, no doubt, very clever of our century. But it is surely a pretty silly sort of cleverness that hoodwinks its own children, fooling the very cleverest of them all to show its strength.

True—but listen further; there is one thing more. How would it be if the benefits of Shaw's work were actually increased by the discovery that their author was a dupe? That is precisely what happens. There are several reasons. It removes the venom from his virulence, for one thing, reduces our resentfulness, leaves him, immensely more likable, just a poor puzzled creature like ourselves. And it also provides the perfect complement and corrective to his contribution of ideas. There is only one way to give Shaw's work any adequacy, to make his utility at all proportionate to his powers, and this is to see him as a gull. To watch the man who supremely prides himself on his freedom from illusions, and on the irresistible power of pure thought, being used as an idle toy by superior powers at the very moment he is triumphantly proving their non-existence, is to be the spectator of something far more than a mere final farce to send us away in good humour; it is to watch an integral scene that entirely alters and immensely deepens the meaning of those that go before. Add Shaw himself to his *dramatis personæ*, and the latter begin to kindle and grow human; make the story of his deception an extra act to all his plays, and they begin to teach a genial tolerance and to breathe a smiling wisdom which, it must be admitted, they do not otherwise exhale. They lose

that bitterness and barrenness, that hard and cruel angularity and bleak glitter, which has led to their author being denounced for inhumanity. To the array of stabbing truths with which they bristle, thrusting out at us like spears, there is added yet another, perhaps the only one omitted, which transforms the fierce attack into a rescue. It sets them wavering and faltering, as in a blur of mist; and that was all they needed to make them noble and reliable. We can trust them after that, for they have lost the hard exactness which has hitherto always made them so unreal. All Shaw's work hitherto has been too precise to be accurate; it has been too exact to be true.

One point more. A glance back at the quotations at the beginning of this article will show the reader that two other great minds have been before us in this suspicion of a stage behind the drop-scene. The fact will reassure some; but others it may damp: a word of comment will satisfy both. It is true that both Stevenson and Rodin pushed the curtain aside—saw the performance going on secretly behind it; but the old Frenchman went no further than that cryptic phrase about the "fraud," and the young Scotsman was compelled to leave the house abruptly before his little forecast was fulfilled. We may therefore enjoy both the sense of their patronage and the prouder one of being pioneers. We still occupy the enviable position of first-nighters. And for my own part I confess that it is with a thrill of real excitement that I now stretch out my hand and press the prompter's bell. . . .

II

And instantly there vanishes, whipped away for ever, that striking picture of St. Bernard, the austere Irish eremite, staining his sackcloth to make it look

like motley, and turning his staff and scrip, sublimely sacrilegious, into a fool's bladder and wand. It simply will not do. History won't have it. Mr. Chesterton, to be sure, has spoken, with much pathos, of Mr. Shaw's "narrow Puritan home"; Mr. Huneker, with pride, has enlarged on his "humble peasant birth"; and to listen to these phrases and then turn to any of the portraits and caricatures, from Max's to Coburn's, from Rodin's to Elliott & Fry's—which have made his face more familiar to the average English reader than that of any personage alive—is really to feel that one discerns the harsh features of the fanatic, that one can recognize in the fierce eyebrows, the aggressive beard, and the scowl, the face of a merciless fanatic, austere as the stony soil from which he sprang, ablaze with the bitter passion of the protestant. Sheer hallucination, I assure you! We are being hoaxed by the beard. It conceals a soft and charming chin. And Chesterton and Huneker are a pair of sentimental humbugs. For absolutely the first and most fundamental thing about Bernard Shaw biographically is—that he was the son of Lucrezia Borgia!

Of Lucrezia Borgia and of the Margaret of *Faust*, and of the Donna Anna of *Don Giovanni*. For Shaw's mother was a young and beautiful Irish opera-singer (she was only twenty years her son's senior), who carried on a "blameless *ménage à trois*" with a famous musical genius on the one hand and the feckless second cousin of a baronet (Bernard Shaw's father) on the other; and Lucrezia (Donizetti's), Donna Anna, and Margaret were her three favourite parts.

It is astonishing how adroitly these romantic facts have been mingled in all the current accounts of his life. "His family was a middle-class one," says one well-known critic, "with all the prejudices and habits of that class." "L'écrivain a peut-être évoqué

des souvenirs d'enfance," writes M. Charles Cestre, "quand il a décrit, dans le *Disciple au Diable*, les affranchements et les indignations d'une famille puritaine dont le chef, le bonhomme Dudgeon, a conservé quelques faiblesses humaines au milieu de l'austérité aigre et hargneuse des siens," and goes on to speak impressively of the youth practising "sans effort une sorte d'ascétisme inné." "Austérité aigre et hargneuse" be hanged! The lad's life was a voluptuous revel. He dreamed and dawdled at school, where he was only a desultory day-boy, and where, as he has owned himself, he learned nothing whatever—not even (more's the pity) fives or footer; and at home, the less distracted, he simply soaked himself lusciously in the licensed orgies and ecstasies of music. Melody, grand opera melody, not only, for him, took the place of the prose of real life, he even dissolved all his books in it, making it a vehicle for absorbing Scott and Victor Hugo and Poe, in an absolutely sensuous physical form. "In music," he once wrote (in an article we ought to have reprinted—an early article describing these indulgences):—

> In music you will find the body of and reality of that feeling which the mere novelist could only describe to you; there will come home to your senses something in which you can actually experience the candour and gallant impulse of the hero, the grace and trouble of the heroine, and the extracted emotional quintessence of their love.
>
> I gained penetrating experiences of Victor Hugo and Schiller from Donizetti, Verdi, and Beethoven, of the Bible from Handel, of Goethe from Schumann, of Beaumarchais and Molière from Mozart, and of Mérimée from Bizet, besides finding in Berlioz an unconscious interpreter of Edgar Allan Poe. When I was in the schoolboy adventure vein, I could range from Vincent Wallace to Meyerbeer; I could become quite maudlin over Mendelssohn and Gounod. . . .

Enrich these orgies still further with emotions insatiably sought for in the Italian rooms of the Dublin

Art Gallery—rooms which he admits he haunted hungrily, weeks at a time, all through his romantic adolescence, and you have a faithful impression of the way this young man began to "pratiquer" his "ascétisme inné." When Oscar Wilde's mother, in Merrion Square, was posing languishingly in her drawing-room as Speranza, Mrs. Shaw, in a Dublin theatre, a few streets away, was flinging herself passionately into the part of Azucena; and before the son of the latter was out of his teens he had drained dizzier delight from the coloured lines of the world's greatest painters, and had absorbed far more heady music, than the son of the former did all the days of his life. Nor is the "narrow puritanism" of the picture very markedly increased if we complete it by putting in the figure of Shaw's father—an amiable weak tippler and rather lovable snob, helplessly haughty about his kinsman the baronet; or if we extend it to include the figure of that favourite uncle who (as Mr. Shaw somewhere mentions) used to go about declaring that the revival of Lazarus was a pre-arranged job, done on the basis of a bribe.

No, no! London, a little later, may have partly cemented G.B.S., made a sterner and a sourer, and in some ways a stricter man of him; but, when he reached it, in his twenties, he was an out-and-out romantic—as little like a preacher as Bunyan before Bedford Gaol or St. Francis in the gallant days of his youth. Soaked in Gounod and Mendelssohn, dreaming of Mozart and Michelangelo, hugging a vague idea of becoming "a wicked baritone in opera," he was still (as he has owned) "chronically ashamed and even miserable," simply because "I felt I couldn't do anything." "What was wrong with me was the want of self-respect, the diffidence, the cowardice of the ignoramus and the duffer." "My destiny was to educate London, but what I knew was exactly what

the educated Englishman did not know, and what he knew I either didn't know or didn't believe." He came up to London, in short, as young poets always have come; with a knowledge of life, of human nature, including their own, limited to the information supplied by opera libretti and the hydrogenous prose of De Quincey and Shelley; agonized by their own awkwardness, shamed by their own innocence, desperately troubled by their unpreparedness for destiny, but beautifully upheld through it all by the dim, golden conviction that a Destiny of some distinction does await them, and that London, the wise alchemist, will know the very drop to add to send their dreams showering down in a shining precipitate of definite tasks and high resolutions.

In fact, just exactly the usual glorious mixture of prig, blushing schoolgirl, and god. And the year (this is very important indeed) the year was 1876.

## III

Now let the game softly begin. London, deft, crimp, has one regulation ruse which she tries on all such shy new-comers: she feigns lethargy, indifference, a bored kind of nonchalance, a composure that looks exactly like incapacity—and so, with one stroke, restores the novice's self-confidence and sets his indignation briskly sparking. Apathy, a wasteful apathy—that is invariably the personal quality the place seems to present to the aspirant: a smooth, maddening indifference, not to his own entrance merely (that indeed might have proved his superiority—for that he was humbly prepared), but to her own powers and opportunities, her duties and beauties—to the general dazzling adventurousness and terrific irrevocableness and tormenting possibilities of Life. Actually, to be sure, this languor is merely a mask; it is the disguise adopted by good

nature, good form; the quiet is that of wisdom, not woodenness—the composure is not of torpor, but of powers tested and serene because sure; but the debutant doesn't find this out till much later on. What he does do is to compare this bland calm with his own keenness, and to feel that his prevision of a Destiny was sound. He *is* different from these people, with their small talk and trifling; excitedly he sets his teeth and squares his jaw. Reassured at the very moment he expected to be abashed, he buckles to with his book, picture, play. London has set him to work, very neatly, by pretending to be incapable of commands.

Nine times out of ten, therefore, the trick works to admiration. But Shaw happened to come tenth. Remember the hour; it was the eve of the eighties, when the arts joined the isms. And Carlyle begat Ruskin, and Ruskin begat Morris, and Morris begat Cunninghame-Graham, and the Carpenters and the Cranes and the Salts: instead of velvet jackets and a slap-dash joviality, young artists took to *sæva indignatio* and sandals. It was really very interesting. Just why poetry and proteids should suddenly seem natural affinities; just what there was in the atmosphere to make Jaeger and Ibsen and Esoteric Buddhism appear inevitable associates; and why to eat the leek, loudly declaring it to be the only pure and blameless form of food, should suddenly become the accepted sign of independence—these profound problems have never yet been adequately explained, for we are still doubtless too much involved in the traditions then set on foot to get the full effect of this fearsome abnormality. But though the origins were intricate, there was one plain and large result —the arts went over with a rush to their traditional enemy. They joined the majority. They made friends with the mob. Sculptors, painters, and poets,

for the first time in English history, deserted the aristocrats and lined up with the proletariat. Instead of adoring the graces they began denouncing disgraces. In place of priding themselves on their immunity from the vulgar hobby known as politics, they began to boom and bleat like a lot of leading articles. And they had a thoroughly enjoyable time. For the new game gratified the vanity which is the curse of all their tribe by its flattering sense of putting everybody right; and it satisfied the disrespectfulness which is the chief of all their charms by giving them for target every rule, religion, creed, convention which had lent its countenance to civilization by forming part of it. They became infidels, atheists, anarchists, cosmogonists, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists, anti-vaccinationists. They revelled in a fresh field of topics — they founded numberless societies to listen to their oratory and countless papers that would print their verse and prose: it was canvas and model combined. The big men liked the feeling of doing practical spade-work at last; the little ones (and there seemed to be such a dreadful lot of these) simply loved being ranked as "intellectuals." It gave humble giants, like Morris, a chance to stoop and be chivalrous. It hoisted the pigmies on to platforms where they could hector and strut. It was fine.

Now this was all very well in the case of a Morris, who had already given us his *Guenevere*; and it probably couldn't much damage even a Cunninghame-Graham—for he was a rebel in any case, a Highland rieve by birth, and all these isms were to him simply so many gauntlets which he could fling in the faces of the fat fools he despised: when he charged the ranked policemen in Trafalgar Square on Bloody Sunday, ostensibly in the cause of Democracy, he was really only giving expression, I am sure, to his eternal con-

tempt for the *canaille*; he turned socialist because he was an aristocrat. But in the case of a youngling like Shaw, a tender emotionalist fed hitherto wholly on the sweet-stuff of opera and still viewing the world in terms of Shelley and Wagner, it simply amounted to ravishment. It meant thrusting all his soft faculties into a premature mould; it meant emphasizing and petrifying and fixing for ever on his character just those quaint qualities of contemptuousness and ingenuous disdain which in the ordinary way would just have been softly erased by experience once their first task of setting him producing was performed. It means that instead of prompting him to some piece of self-vindication, some earnest proof of individual worth and power, his boyish bumptiousness began straightway to boast in its own name and make an ambition of mere self-assertiveness.

For of course he was helpless. Face to face with such a force, what could a poor romantic do? He yielded at a touch—fell like a shot sea-bird—was culled like a slender wayside flower. With the echoes of the hammer-song still hammering in his head, he saw himself as a Sigurd among Alberics—and since everywhere about him the old obvious evils spawned and sprawled, all the generous decencies of youth joined with its egotisms to make him vow to have a drive at London-Fafnir. "My destiny is to educate London," he assured himself solemnly; and set about the job without delay. He himself has described how the final vision descended and crystallized all his vague cravings. Perceive him flutteringly approach the fateful Webb. He has strayed into one of the meetings of the myriad societies of that day, a body calling itself (doubtless for some perfectly adequate reason) the Zeletical Society—and this is the stirring sight he beheld:—

The speaker was a young man, about twenty-one, with a profile that suggested, on account of the nose and imperial, an improve-

ment on Napoleon the Third. He had a fine forehead, a long head, eyes that were built on top of two highly developed organs of speech (according to the phrenologists) and remarkably thick, strong, dark hair. He knew all about the subject of the debate; knew more than the lecturer; had read everything that had ever been written on the subject; and remembered all the facts that bore on it. He used notes, read them, ticked them off one by one, threw them away, and finished with a coolness and clearness that to me, in my trembling state, seemed miraculous. This young man was the ablest man in England—Sidney Webb.

And he was exactly Shaw's own age. The butterfly was caught. He too would be a dictator, an authority, a liberator, a dogmatic and precocious oracle. This was grand opera and literature and a noble knightliness combined—De Reszke, Ruskin, and Sigurd in one. He went at once into training. Nervous—unready—hypersensitive—naïve—with subtlety of apprehension and a consuming fondness for fineness the very first characteristics of all his faculties—he was preposterously unfitted for the part; but (and this is specially interesting) the very susceptibility that ought to have saved him made him as wax to the suggestion—the very imagination which he ought to have carried far away from platforms to some place where it could work undisturbed now flushed the dreary planks with limelight—disguised and garlanded the prospect—deluded him into seeing the cheap and prosy game of demagoguing as the very embodiment of romance. "I vowed I would join Webb's society, go every week, speak every week, and become a speaker or perish in the attempt. And I carried out this resolution. I suffered agonies no one suspected. During the speech of the debate I resolved to follow my heart used to beat as painfully as a recruit's going under fire for the first time. I could not use my notes; when I looked at the paper in my hand I could not collect myself enough to decipher a word. And of the four or five wretched points which were my pretext for

this ghastly practice of mine I invariably forget three —the best three." Flaubert and Pater undergoing flagellation in the hope of being granted purity of prose underwent far less torment than did this equally fine artist to learn the tricks of Cockney repartee:

> I attended the Hampstead Historic Club once a fortnight, and spent a night in the alternative weeks at a private circle of Economists. I made all my acquaintances think me madder than usual by the pertinacity with which I attended debating societies and haunted all sorts of hole-and-corner debates and public meetings and made speeches at them. I was President of the Local Government Board at "an amateur Parliament"

—and he even turned the very novels that might have proved his salvation (by giving his creative energy a path of escape) into mimic debating societies too—not only rising up in the name of each character in turn (Connolly, Lydia Carew, Cashel, Trefusis) to deliver a short address on some selected topic, but actually turning as many of the characters as possible into working models, draft sketches, of that omniscient, imperturbable Sigurd-Shelley-Wagner-Webb which he had resolved Bernard Shaw must become. "I am thoroughly well-satisfied with myself," says Elinor McQuinch in *The Irrational Knot.* "At last I have come out of a scene without having forgotten the right thing to say." Connolly, in the same book, is "concentrated and calm, making no tentative movements of any kind (even tying a white tie did not puzzle him into fumbling), but acting with a certainty of air, and consequent economy of force, dreadful to the irresolute." These, it may be said, are simply self-reflections, involuntary mimings of the artist in his picture. Looking back at Connolly now, when Shaw has grown so like him, it is natural to regard him as an unconscious copy of his maker. But it is Shaw who is the consequence, Connolly the cause. These novels of

G.B.S.'s nonage were indeed mirrors held up to his nature—but only in order to help him fix his make-up. "He looked at his programme and calculated how soon his time to sing would come. Then he unrolled his music and placed two copies ready to his hand upon the table. Having made these arrangements with a self-possession that quite disconcerted the clergyman, he turned to examine the rest of the company." This is the curious projection of an ideal, not unwitting self-portraiture; and "you cannot want a thing and have it too." Modelling these little mannequins—studying their gestures—perfecting their effectiveness with his pen—putting them into predicaments to learn how to behave and continually calling on them for impromptu speeches—"There, by the Grace of God," mutters our young author savagely, "will one day go George Bernard Shaw." Fate, when she began to fool him, hadn't reckoned on this solemnity. The joke was already going rather far.

## IV

It went further very shortly. The result of these efforts, heroically sustained (our Sigurd being meanwhile financially supported, it is ironic but right to recall, by a radiant Mimmy in the person of that romantic young mother to whom he owed the imagination he was thwarting), the result of these pig-headed efforts, this topsy-turvy idealism, was the construction of one of the most remarkable verbal weapons ever forged by a literary craftsman. It was an instrument built expressly for cut-and-thrust platform work; and every irrelevant qualification or charm was ruthlessly threshed out of its texture. Now to get rid of these alloys and yet maintain the thing's temper meant the invention of a whole new range of prose devices; and it is the way he worked at these, the devouring adroit-

ness he showed, the fresh formations and annealings and interlockings of language which he resourcefully invented and perfected, that really give us our first absolutely infuriating idea of the triumphs he would have brought us, the work he might have done, if only he had never been drugged and trepanned and wastefully sold into eternal slavery whilst asleep. Much has been written in praise of his work; but of his workmanship, I always feel, far too little; never yet, at any rate, have I seen any adequate acknowledgment of the extraordinary perfection and technical importance of his style. "More stiletto than style!" some one murmurs, a bit sourly—but that is only the peevishness of pedantry. Shaw's prose can be used to carve creatively as well as to kill—and in other hands than his it surely will be; whatever else Shaw has done he has hung a glittering new and needed weapon in the armoury of the arts. Conditioned absolutely by the special character of the campaign he had in view—submitting to every limitation without shuffling, and taking advantage of every licence without shame—it is the very finest example in the whole range of English letters of prose written to be uttered with physical forcibleness on the rapid levels of man-to-man speech, and yet retaining, unsuspected, all those subtle powers of balance, of rhythm and picturesqueness, whose aid must be employed before all defences can be carried and which steal triumphantly into the citadel of the mind of the hearer through insidious emotional doorways whilst the colloquialisms keep the common sense engaged. Technically, that is certainly its supreme innovation—and that will always make it an essential part of the history of the development of our English prose. The hour of oratory was over; the peroration was punctured; purple passages, instead of being banners to kindle men's hearts, had become mere red rags to

rouse restiveness: for mutinous democrats and fierce vegetarian-anarchists wanted utterances that hit and looked like lumps of steel. And the problem, briefly, was therefore how to appear to be using this blunt life-preserver sort of language without really relinquishing the air of the subtler devices which had hitherto been looked on as the sole prerogative of rhetoric.

Well, Shaw found a way. His hearers wanted straight talk: so he cast periods like horizontal bars. But they were bars that worked like piston-rods: all built for thrust and drive, they displayed the splendid beauty of clean speed; and so, at the very moment when they seemed to be contemptuously discarding all merely emotional adjuncts, they were actually dizzying the audience with that supremely unusual excitement, the intoxicating ecstasy of pace. Shaw stripped all his sentences of those trailing wreaths and ropes of metaphor which Ruskin, his predecessor in these paths of sensual socialism, had elaborately wound round his message—and then he multiplied still further the effect of impetuousness thus obtained by devoting all the energy that might have gone to making garlands to the task of fitting clause into clause with such ingenious sockets that never a joint could be seen, and a long sentence really made up of many added items lay when finished as level as a spear, streaking past as though launched with one lunge. It is extraordinarily interesting to watch this process being perfected: first of all the studious assemblage of the parts, then the gradual speeding-up of the machine.

Mr. Reginald Harrington Lind, at the outset of his career, had no object in life save that of getting through it as easily as possible; and this he understood so little how to achieve that he suffered himself to be married to a Lancashire cotton-spinner's heiress. She bore him three children, and then eloped with a

professor of spiritualism, who deserted her on the eve of her fourth confinement, in the course of which she caught scarlet fever and died. Her child survived, but was sent to a baby farm and starved to death in the usual manner.

That is an early effort, from *The Irrational Knot.* Already, it will be seen, the desired effect of imperturbability is there, gained by that diligent maintenance of a monotone; and the crowded middle sentence does nearly take the listener's breath away by telescoping four travails, two tragedies, and a comic professor of spiritualism into a couple of level lines. But there are still a few defects: the jolts at the commas break the pace rather badly, and the sentences, though they are still comparatively short ones, are only kept continuous by making each clause cannon the next instead of plunking past like a rifle-bullet straight from stop to stop. Months of practice and experiment, on paper by day and on platforms each night, taught him how to overcome these conditions. The sentence that follows was one written for an actual speech (and written, it is interesting to note, in that last home of the old school of rhetoric, William Morris's Manor House at Kelmscott), and the reader will see how perfectly the sense of precipitancy is secured to it by the simple device of dropping its successive items into the slots of a kind of eternally expanding carrier which branches forward from a single steady verb:—

One can see that the Local Government Board of the future will be a tremendous affair; that foreign States will be deeply affected by the reaction of English progress; that international trade, always the really dominant factor in foreign policy, will have to be reconsidered from a new point of view when profit comes to be calculated in terms of net social welfare instead of individual pecuniary gain; that our present system of imperial aggression, in which, under pretext of exploration and colonization, the flag follows the filibuster and trade follows the flag, with the missionary bringing up the rear, must collapse when the

control of our military forces passes from the capitalist classes to the people; that the disappearance of a variety of classes with a variety of what are now ridiculously called "public opinions" will be accompanied by the welding of society into one class with a public opinion of inconceivable weight; that this public opinion will make it for the first time possible effectively to control the population; that the economic independence of women, and the supplanting of the head of the household by the individual as the recognized unit of the State, will materially alter the status of children and the utility of the institution of the family; and that the inevitable reconstitution of the State Church on a democratic basis may, for example, open up the possibility of the election of an avowed Free-thinker like Mr. John Morley or Mr. Bradlaugh to the deanery of Westminster.

It is nothing but a series of separate statements, but they are so socketed that the result is torrential: the sentence seems positively to go whipping through its supporting semicolons much as a telegraph wire does through the posts when you watch it racing past from a swift train. And additional practice still, the months stretching into years, enabled him to eliminate even slotted frames and posts: in the paragraph that follows, written at the height of his powers, those recurrent "thats" have been replaced by absolutely imperceptible piers, so that as the reader's mind is carried over it experiences a helpless vertigo — it clutches its guide giddily, yielding him a blank subjection, like the limp obedience paid a Blondin by the fellow on his back—a far completer surrender (at any rate till we touch solid ground again) than the reverence offered to a Fors-Clavigerating Ruskin:—

Therefore do not misunderstand my plain statement of the fundamental constitution of London society as an Irishman's reproach to your nation. From the day I first set foot on this foreign soil I knew the value of the prosaic qualities of which Irishmen teach Englishmen to be ashamed as well as I knew the vanity of the poetic qualities of which Englishmen teach Irishmen to be proud. For the Irishman instinctively disparages

the quality which makes the Englishman dangerous to him ; and the Englishman instinctively flatters the faults that make the Irishman harmless and amusing to him. What is wrong with the prosaic Englishman is what is wrong with the prosaic men of all countries : stupidity. The vitality which places nourishment and children first, heaven and hell a somewhat remote second, and the health of society as an organic whole nowhere, may muddle successfully through the comparatively tribal stages of gregariousness ; but in nineteenth-century nations and twentieth-century empires the determination of every man to be rich at all costs and of every woman to be married at all costs must without a highly scientific social organization produce a ruinous development of poverty, celibacy, prostitution, infant mortality, adult degeneracy, and everything that wise men most dread. In short, there is no future for men, however brimming with crude vitality, who are neither intelligent nor politically educated enough to be Socialists. So do not misunderstand me in the other direction either : if I appreciate the vital qualities of the bee, I do not guarantee the Englishman against being, like the bee (or the Canaanite), smoked out and unloaded of his honey by beings inferior to himself in simple acquisitiveness, combativeness, and fecundity, but superior to him in imagination and cunning.

Lightened of all adjectives, nimble with nouns, turning categories into keyboards, he is wont to ripple us a run and, avoiding vowels in order to get the snap of consonants, it rattles past at a rate that makes the best of Swift seem slow, and pelts the brain with stinging drops like driving hail. It is deliberately cold and colourless, but it produces a kind of glow, an unusual warmth that almost melts the icy argument, almost turns it into something rich and wild. For rapidity, poignancy, unanimity, promptness, an exquisite timing and adjustment of its parts, there is no prose to be compared with it in English. And just as an athlete is more beautiful than an æsthete, so it grows more sensuous the more austere it becomes, positively practising a bodily seductiveness by seeming wholly to rely on an appeal to cold-blooded intelligence. It was very interesting, very curious

virtuosity; with of course a fundamental justness in its paradox. For it was really Shaw's joyous sense of picturesqueness that made him pick this sour pose of acid reasonableness and sustain it with such zest; it was a vivid, romantic imagination that enabled him to perfect it, living into the part with all his power; and so it was therefore profoundly logical that the result should be a romantic reputation—a name for remorseless common sense that had the goblin quality of legend, prevailing on men and artists to regard his gift of lightning logic with an uneasy twilight reverence and awe.

## V

Then why bewail its acquisition? In face of all these merits, why pity the manufacturer of this pitiless prose and propound this dark theory about his being the dupe of a decoy? There are reasons in plenty. Hitherto we have spoken of this instrument of expression as though it were something solid and separable—as a sword, which he forged; as a flute, which he played on; a detachable piece of his equipment. That is one of the weaknesses of rhetoric. It was actually his own mind that he put on the anvil and altered; it was his own larynx that he fitted with patent stops. The sword cut both ways, carving the hand that controlled it; the flute was a magic flute that filled the mind of the player with all the tunes that flowed through it, compelling his thoughts to move in step with its piping. The parallel-bars of his prose have seemed to us thus far a firm apparatus on which he could perform acrobatically. We have now to face the fact that they were the bars of a cage, and that Shaw had shut himself and his capers inside it.

And by this self-restriction something much more

malignant is meant than the mere hemming-in of his mind with wrong subjects. It is true, indeed, that the man who trains himself to speak

> without notes, of Rent, Interest, Profit, Wages, Toryism, Liberalism, Socialism, Communism, Anarchism, Trade-Unionism, Co-operation, Democracy, the Division of Society into Classes, and the suitability of Human Nature to Systems of Just Distribution,

is building up his views rather badly—too hastily leaving the principal sites of his brain to a rabble of reach-me-down tenants. But if there had been nothing worse than this, Shaw would have pulled through, after a check; he had creative energy enough to make even Interest interesting, and to convert Rents into a human reality; he would have ultimately humanized these ill-conditioned aliens much as a rich soil will regenerate and civilize a top-dressing of undesirable settlers. No, the fatal thing was not the type of topic he discussed; it was the attitude he struck whilst discussing. It induced a spiritual deformity, a perpetual kink which he will carry to his grave; you might say (I, at any rate, would have no right to reprove you) that it produced a condition of permanent hump. We have seen how he slaved to acquire a tone of icy arrogance. Well, once found, it fairly froze to his tongue. The æsthetic fashion of the hour favoured contempt, tirades, antagonisms, an omniscient schoolmastering of creation. Instead of wearing it a moment and then tossing it aside, this man hugged it to him till it became a second skin.

And the reason for this rueful permanence, like all the primary causes in this amazing comedy of errors, only make the result the more perverse. For it was exactly Shaw's unsuitability for the rigid part of pedagogue that made him adopt the Dotheboys demeanour so exuberantly; it was exactly because

he was an artist, wholly governed and swayed by the artist's deep, controlling sense of consistency of form, that he refused to relinquish his rôle of bitterness and rancour and persisted in displays of conscious bad form. A weaker artist would have suffered less: our Cranes soon ceased their clamour, our Carpenters turned craftsmen, working happily at a bench instead of irascibly endeavouring to occupy one. All the genuine born propagandists too, on the other hand, changed their manner quite cheerily; the Salts of the earth, after acting as irritants for a time, sociably subsided later on into agreeable condiments—as Secretaries to the Humane Society, and so on.

But Shaw is utterly incapable of this carnalness. He is overwhelmingly consumed by the poet's passion for unity and symmetry. He feels forced to adhere to all the attitudes of his salad-days—down even to their devotion to salad; he is incapable of confessing sunnily that those early passions for rolled oats were really only another of youth's ways of sowing wild ones. That accusation of capriciousness so often brought against him—how heartily one wishes it were true! He lacks the courage to abandon his Convictions. Like his own Sergius, he "never withdraws." He may advance—that is another thing; but, even so, he always carries his old opinions carefully with him, no matter what the extravagant cost of carriage, ingeniously persuading himself, and us, as he does so, how absolutely essential they are to his equipment. He somewhere reminds us that we all die once each eight years—but in his own case the estate is strictly entailed; he takes these intimate ancestors of his with the most tremendous seriousness; he would sooner die than repudiate their pledges; and many of his apparently wildest and least forgivable extravagances have been simply due to his proud attempt to fulfil these contracts. There is perhaps

a kind of cowardice here—but what I do want us to realize is that it is the cowardice that comes from an artist's horror of the disgracefulness of making or drawing a false stroke. Shaw wouldn't a bit mind giving himself away; what he cannot bear is the thought that he has involuntarily done so. It would seem so very careless. Taking life with the triple seriousness of Art, of Ireland, and of Youth, the idea of having wasted a drop of it would anguish him; and almost all his irresponsibilities have been the result of this terrifying sense of personal responsibility. It is this, for example, and not freakishness, that makes him dwell so disproportionately on apparent trivialities of dress and diet—on his way of eating and drinking, of spelling "cigarets" and not smoking them; and when he rages so fantastically over our refusal to agree, he is in reality just beating back desperately any private qualms as to his rightness, frantically justifying himself to himself. It is the same boyish fear that sets him eternally chattering explanations. He is often not so much trying to discover the truth as to find some further proof that he has told it. When he buttonholes us so officiously outside his own plays—prefacing, promising, assuring—for all the world like a Showman blarneying desperately away outside his booth before he dares let us in—he is really not so much trying to humbug *us* with his harangues as to reassure and satisfy himself. He uses all the vigour of his imagination to hypnotize that vigour; his wit never displays a more wonderful nimbleness than when trying to reconcile his own sallies. He will found a philosophy to escape admitting a jest was idle,[1] and then

[1] See, for example, the solemn Note at the end of *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, where Mr. Shaw desperately improvises a solemn theory about the Influence of Climate Upon Character and the Comparative Unimportance of Racial Influx, in order to persuade

write a play to prove the philosophy humanly true,[1] and then extend the philosophy to include clauses which declare a dramatist's characters are free and independent personalities, quite uncontrolled by the conscious will of their creator, and that he himself is a dramatist in that sense.[2] In brief, he is the kind of man who, rather than admit, even to himself, that he has got into a hole, would remorselessly chip corners off his own character till it fitted, no matter what the mutilation cost him.

And this, and even worse than this, is precisely the horrible practice we are now to see him engaged in. Worse, because his thrawn thoroughness, the artist's instinct perverted, made him mangle and carve his conception of the whole of the rest of mankind in order to make it fit into his own forced malformities. His instinct for harmony made him insist that disharmony was an essential condition of health. "In this world," he declared, "if you do not say a thing in an irritating way, you might just as well not say it at all, since nobody will trouble themselves about anything that does not trouble them." "The fact is," he said again, "there is nothing the public de-

himself that the pantomime fooling with Britannus is a piece of penetrating historical portraiture and a subtle psychological study. The gravely reproduced portraits of Cæsar and General Burgoyne in the same volume and the solemn resurrection of a contemporary print of the Pharos of Alexandria are analogous devices for cunningly satisfying his conscience that he has been spending his powers on work of an adequate dignity. One sometimes feels Mr. Shaw must have less humour than levity —the latter seems so often to outrun the first.

[1] See *John Bull's Other Island*, where that impromptu Britannus theory about the Influence of Climate Upon, etc., is dragged out again in order to be propped up, exhumed in order to be properly animated.

[2] See Preface to *Man and Superman*, p. xvii; Preface to *John Bull's Other Island*, p. vii; and other amendments innumerable.

spises so much as an attempt to please it. Torment is its natural element: it is only the saint who has any capacity for happiness."

He actually persuaded himself that it is necessary to hurt in order to heal; that the only way to encourage men is to discourage them, and that it is necessary to be thoroughly disagreeable in order to persuade them to agree. Simply to save himself from the agony of admitting to himself that his early attitude and insolences had been largely just juvenile egregiousness, he determined to agonize the rest of the world. He began a campaign of universal irritation, repeating feverishly, like a missionary muttering godless prayers, that taunts and intolerance were logically much the best of all methods of preaching and spreading the gospel of The Brotherhood of Man.

And of course it couldn't end with that absurdity. The disguise had to get deeper, his voice had to rise louder in order to deafen his own ears. Other arguments had to radiate, flung out to balance and support the first: once his creative energy got working in this accidental twig it shot out branches till it burst into a self-supporting tree, seeking a satisfying symmetry. The first corollary that ran out, to act as stay and flying buttress, and subsequently to become a parent stem of its own (so that it now sometimes seems the central pillar of them all, the very tent-pole of his patent storm-proof creed), was the formula that all men's miseries are the result of the discrepancy between the sentimental version of life fed into most of us and life as it actually is, and that to hack away these sweetnesses and cauterize the wounds, to kill what he (wrongly) called "the romantic convention" with the cruellest acid and steel he could find, was therefore hero's work, hygienic work, a harsh but holy warfare, a completion of the surgery

begun by old Cervantes. Now there *was* some of the sap of human truth in this at least—it did touch actual earth: it is a diagnosis, indeed, that we can find an instant use for, here and now, for doesn't it form the perfect definition of the source of all Shaw's own disasters? It is because he sentimentally sees himself as a satirist and harsh realist, instead of harshly realizing he is actually a romantic, that he has gone so hopelessly astray; it is because he sees himself as a Cervantes when he is really a Don Quixote (down even to his personal appearance, by the way: G.B.S. and G.K.C.—the Knight and Sancho, irresistibly; and down even to the famous misadventure with the dolls—for Shaw's chief mistake about the theatre, as we will see, is his solemn attribution to the marionettes he found there of powers they never have possessed) that he has suffered the Don's own doom. But the vitality in this principle, ironically enough, only served to sustain him while he unconsciously provided a perfect demonstration of its fatal action; and if a sudden, shivering sense of its personal aptness did ever assail his subconsciousness, it simply hurried him on with the task of planting, on the other side, as a stout protection against any lurking fatuousness, the famous pair of reciprocating twin hypotheses—the hypotheses of the Artist-Philosopher and the Superman.

The urgent necessity for these will be recognized. The theory of the Superman was essentially nothing but a defence of platform-dogmatism; to bully and brow-beat in the name of *Egalité, Fraternité* was decently impossible without some such extension of the synthesis; and to the aid of the announcement that "no one having any practical experience of Proletarian Democracy has any belief in its capacity for solving great political problems or even for doing ordinary parochial work intelligently," there came

that fine suggestion of the Life-force working up and up, through speechless monsters, and stupid, stuttering minor men, seeking for a brain that could express it, till at length, through the intellect of the Artist-Philosopher (another name for Sigurd-Ruskin-De-Reszke) it achieved articulation, became conscious of its own desires, and delivered its commands and warnings brusquely to the unemerged remainder of its carcase :—

The mysterious thing we call life organizes itself into all living shapes, bird, beast, beetle, and fish, rising to the human marvel in cunning dwarfs and in laborious muscular giants, capable, these last, of enduring toil, willing to buy love and life, not with suicidal curses and renunciations, but with patient manual drudgery in the service of higher powers. And these higher powers are called into existence by the same self-organization of life still more wonderfully into rare persons who may by comparison be called gods, creatures capable of thought, whose aims extend far beyond the satisfaction of their bodily appetites and personal affections, since they perceive it is only by the establishment of a social order founded on the common bonds of moral faith that the world can rise from mere savagery.[1]

"Men of genius are the men selected by Nature to carry on the work of building up an intellectual consciousness of her own instinctive purpose." "The great man incarnates the philosophic consciousness of life. "All his treatises and poems and scriptures are the struggle of Life to become divinely conscious of itself instead of stumbling blindly hither and thither in the line of least resistance." This Life-force says :—

I have done a thousand wonderful things unconsciously by merely willing to live and following the line of least resistance : now I want to know myself and my destination and choose my path ; so I have made a special brain, a philosopher's brain, to

[1] *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 11,

grasp this knowledge for me. "And this," says the Life-force to the philosopher, "must thou strive to do for me until thou diest, when I will make another brain and another philosopher to carry on the work."[1]

So were arrogance justified and self-suspicion stilled: our infatuated Don Quixote has a Dulcinea now—this stringy, sterile German spinster of a Life-force; and rides on solemnly enchanted. No lifting his hallucination now! "Metaphysic" is only "metaphor" spelt in four syllables; never yet was there a poet could resist one. Watch, now, how his conception forthwith clings and spreads—dilating organically, expanding spontaneously, exhibiting all the signs of true vitality, as all conceptions do, even the most damnatory, if ever they get a purchase in an artist's generative consciousness, and suck at his divine but undiscriminating vigour. Dogma dovetails into dogma; pedant theories flower as plays; these scatter seeds that shoot up fresher saplings to support and screen the skinny parent crook. Thus, the Superman plainly needing some solid social backing if he were going to keep the Artist-Philosopher on his feet, there spontaneously sprang to support him the now familiar Shavian doctrine (so soon, alas, to grow sadly shop-soiled) declaring the healthiness of wealthiness and the heavenliness of worldliness and the crime of being crushed.[2] This in turn disclosing dangers (*we* know the hands it played into—the greasy souls it fed with self-approval), up rose a fresh law to protect it—the law asserting that there is a safe Saturation-point to Human Sensuousness, that self-restraint follows indul-

[1] *Man and Superman*, p. 134.

[2] "The universal regard for money is the one hopeful fact in our civilization, the one sound spot in our social conscience." "The greatest of evils and the worst of crimes is poverty; our first duty, a duty to which every other consideration should be sacrificed, is not to be poor."

gence, and licence observes limits, and "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." And when this too wavered dubiously (for what of our rakes in their muck?—and aren't there indulgences that go on without deepening—blisses that keep step with life cunningly, feeding on it craftily, careful to keep their prey in condition?—and aren't there satisfactions that dim the mind to soothe the body?)—when this, in turn, tottered, a last convulsive inspiration, the impulse of self-preservation hard at work, made it shoot out a further branch that caught and clung round a formula that made G.K. Sancho think Shaw an ascetic, that by a lucky loop led right back to the parent stem—the formula, namely, that men don't like happiness, that bliss only bores them [1]—thus perfectly completing the sinister circle by backing up the first defence of offensiveness, filially feeding into and fortifying the falsity by which it was primarily fed.

Oh yes, it was neat; and none the less because it turned its very neatness to account by declaring clear thinking the supreme effort of the Life-force. But those who know that the clearness of a system is a proof of incompleteness, that definition is only gained by blurring truth, mustn't allow their possession of that knowledge to prevent them from perceiving the passion and glow that lie beneath these cold, clipped, charmless, lucid leaves. For to do that is to miss the real cause of the coldness, and to make the miserable, fashionable, unforgivable mistake of seeing Shaw as a mere marvellous mental machine. The thing to remember is the central tap-root of this rigid tree of thought—that accursed grafted crab of studied sourness. It is that which diverts the good

[1] "Nobody wants bliss particularly or could stand more than a very brief taste of it, if it were attainable." "The pursuit of happiness is the most miserable of human occupations."

juices and chills them with gall, embittering the ultimate fruit; it is that initial, unnatural theory of the virtue of venom (as though a serpent's wisdom were communicated by its fangs!) that has governed the whole habit of the growth. It makes its pity appear pitiless, it curdles its kindliness, it forces the chivalry to emerge as contempt. The exasperating thing about all Shaw's utterances isn't their surface savagery or cynicism; it is the sight of the sweet sap being choked and changed behind; cut through the metallic coating that covers all his leaves with that glib, repellent, acrid shine, and you get generosity, wonder, wistfulness, awe, any amount of lovableness and love. His heart is in the right place; it is only his tongue that has gone wrong; it has taken a permanent twist into his cheek. When he tries to preach gentleness, it turns the words into jeers; it makes him malevolent in the cause of mercy, quarrelsome in the name of peace; and when he strives to shout friendly advice this interpreter, tutored too well, changes the message into a cold snarl of disdain. He sits down to write a play (called *Widowers' Houses*) pleading the cause of the oppressed; and the result makes the whole world howl him down as heartless and inhuman. He writes another (*Major Barbara*) to demonstrate "the central truth of Christianity—the vanity of revenge and punishment," and his hearers shiver at the sight of its ferocity. When he tries to stop the practice of cutting up live animals he can only do so by rending the character of doctors. He believes that "every man is a temple of the Holy Ghost" and promptly calls us "shirks, duffers, malingerers, weaklings, cowards." All his announcements are denouncements; he must attack to defend, his affirmations reach our ears as denials, all his most positive utterances seem harsh strings of no's.

And observe that always, like a prisoner tightening his knots by struggling, the curbed creativeness within him increases these grimaces, the cordial energy straining and jerking at the mask till it becomes a very nightmare of menace. For the choked delight in music and gaiety, in rhapsody and heartiness, bubbling up where it can, spends itself on ecstasies of insolence, wild arias of acrimony, arpeggios of contumely and spleen. For instance :—

. . . the physician is still the credulous impostor and petulant scientific coxcomb whom Molière ridiculed ; the schoolmaster remains at best a pedantic child-farmer and at worst a flagellomaniac ; the philanthropist is still a parasite on misery as the doctor is on disease ; the miracles of priestcraft are none the less fraudulent and mischievous because they are now called scientific experiments and conducted by professors ; we shake our heads at the dirt of the Middle Ages in cities made grimy with soot and foul and disgusting with shameless tobacco-smoking ; public health authorities deliberately go through incantations with burning sulphur (which they know to be useless) because the people believe in it as devoutly as the Italian peasant believes in the liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius ; and straightforward public lying has reached gigantic developments, there being nothing to choose in this respect between the pickpocket at the police-station and the minister on the Treasury bench, the editor in the newspaper office, the City magnate advertising bicycle tyres that do not side-slip, the clergyman subscribing the Thirty-nine Articles, and the vivisector who pledges his knightly honour that no animal operated on in the physiological laboratory suffers the slightest pain. Cowardice is universal : patriotism, public opinion, parental duty, discipline, religion, morality, are only fine names for intimidation, and cruelty, gluttony, and credulity keep cowardice in countenance. We cut the throat of a calf and hang it up by the heels to bleed to death so that our veal cutlet may be white ; we nail geese to a board and cram them with food because we like the taste of liver disease ; we tear birds to pieces to decorate women's hats ; we mutilate domestic animals for no reason at all except to follow an instinctively cruel fashion ; and we connive at the most abominable tortures in the hope of discovering some magical cure for our own diseases by them.

Some people call that courage; it is really self-indulgence. It is poetry perverted, imagination amok, a pure love of harmony, gaiety, sufficiency, intoxicated by the rush of recitative and simply carried away out of joyfulness into a rising crescendo of wrath. Stifle a virtue and you always get a vice—and outbursts like these are simply the revenges taken by his temperament for being thwarted. And, regarded as revenges, their success is profound — for they utterly ruin the cause for which the sacrifice was made. No doubt at all about that. Exactly as in Ruskin's case, the piston-rod rhetoric sinks the ship it was invented to drive; the imaginations of both these men, turned into wrong channels, ruined the cases they were kidnapped to plead. Shavian rhapsodies like that either produce patronizing titters, as at the newest caper of our mountebank; or else an irritation that ends in opposition. Whilst poor humanity's humblest answer to such trouncings and tirades would after all be by far the most crushing: "You say I am a duffer, a weakling, a coward? My kindheartedness merely cowardice, my morals a mush, my honour a pitiable sham? Very well. You are wiser than I am; are indeed (if I take you aright) the very Universe become articulate and aware; I am therefore bound to believe what you say. Only, if these are my qualities, then they must also be your keyboard. It is upon them you must play in order to alter and guide me. Deftly adapting your message to my stupidity and cowardice, you will tactfully teach me the truth. Yet—you don't do this. I misunderstand you completely—you say so yourself. But to me, in my darkness, that seems simply a proof that—you must have misunderstood me. You say you see all my weaknesses; I appoint you my teacher; five minutes later you start flogging me like a positive Squeers for my failure to comprehend

your remarks. It doesn't seem in keeping. Either there is something wrong with your voice, which you cannot possibly help; or there is something wrong with your estimate of my hearing. In either case—who is to be blamed? I feel there must be something wrong with your credentials. Perhaps your voice is not the voice of the Universe after all. Or perhaps you are not a very good judge of other people's hearing. Myself, I favour both views. I don't fancy a Universe talking falsetto; and I don't think you are a good judge, not a particularly good judge of other people. These thoughts are meant kindly to you. A blind leader of the blind will probably bring about disaster—but at least he will consider his poor companion's shortcomings. How much wickeder, wastefuller, more shameful and ludicrous, would be the case of the clear-sighted leader who broke his client's neck because he couldn't be bothered to remember his afflictions. Good-day, Mr. Shaw. Here's your fee. We part friends." So, in his humble way, says Everyman.

And his complaint brings us naturally to the culminating scene in our Comedy. We are now going to contemplate Mr. Shaw being compelled to proclaim and believe himself a dramatist, and, at the same time, by the self-same power and process, being carefully unfitted for the rôle.

## PART II

### I

The first half of this epitome, the way Shaw's early pose of rebel insolence placed him on a track which propelled him implacably towards play-writing, is easily traced by simply jotting down some dates. Recapitulate rapidly the early facts of his life in a straightforward string, and you see chronology creeping

up to this crisis. In 1876, twenty years old, he crosses from Ireland to London, knowing more and thinking more of pictures and music than of anything else in the world. A couple of years later, entirely by accident, he hears a certain young Sidney Webb (exactly his own age) laying down the laws of life to an audience of awe-stricken adults; and resolves to become a platform speaker too. In pursuit of this fell purpose he permeates all the societies for scolding Society which were a feature of the London of that time, and by 1882 he has so out-woven Webb, has caught the trick of all-round truculence so perfectly, that even the most hardened and ferocious food-reformer, dress-reformer, land-reformer, reform-reformer, *et hoc genus omne*, will blench at the mention of his name. And in 1885, at the age of twenty-nine (perhaps feeling that this fearless independence had depended on his mother long enough), he is looking out for some settled job in journalism.

Now, what would you expect to happen? Naturally, he was made a musical critic. "I have never had a programme," he once said, "I simply took the job that was given me and did it the best way I could"; but in those days of alert editors a man who knew more about pictures and music than anything else in the world, and who had learned to express himself imperiously, was journalistically a dedicated soul. He became art critic to *The World* in 1885, musical critic to the *Star* in 1888, and in 1895, following the course of nature, he was unhitched from the *Star* by Mr. Frank Harris and installed as dramatic critic to *The Saturday*.

The inevitability of all that is as evident as $2 \times 2 = 4$. What happens next has the same infernal neatness. It was a perfect repetition of his earlier innocent display among the societies and Socialists. He had taken rebelliousness more seriously than the rebels them

selves, and played the part with an overpowering completeness. He now idolized the theatre in the same impulsive way, and was once more taken in by his own eloquence. For Shaw's besetting weakness is a certain stubborn pride of soul which cannot permit him to admit, even in a whisper to himself, that the cause he is engaged in is not crucial; and he now reacted exactly as such a character could be counted on to react, with results distinctly startling to the stage. For no sooner had Mr. Harris seen him settled in his stall than he sprang up declaring it a choir-stall in a cathedral. "The theatre," said he, "is a place where two or three are gathered together, with an apostolic succession as serious and as continuously inspired as that younger institution, the apostolic succession of the Christian Church." "The theatre," he said, "is as important as the Church was in the Middle Ages, and much more important than the Church in London now." It is "a factory of thought, a prompter of conscience, an elucidator of conduct, an armoury against despair and dullness, and a temple of the Ascent of Man." Its plays were "identical with a church service as a combination of artistic ritual, profession of faith and sermon"; and its players, to their own immense embarrassment, were hailed as "hierophants of a cult as eternal and sacred as any professed religion in the world." Our Don Quixote, dear romantic, was discomfiting the marionettes by taking them with unintended seriousness.

The completion of the operation will be plain. Mr. Shaw may never persuade us that the theatre exerts a power equal to that which established Inquisitions, and curdled Europe into Crusades, and shot the great frozen fountains of Chartres and Rouen into mid-sky; but he quickly persuaded himself. Just as his first infatuation made his pride produce a theory which put the case for contentiousness so confoundedly con-

vincingly that it enthusiastically endeared to him an attitude it was only intended to excuse, so now his heated declarations of the supreme importance of the drama burgeoned out into corollaries so credible that he had to believe in them himself. He became convinced that Drama was the thing best worth doing. It was therefore the work worthiest of his powers. He was already middle-aged—but no matter. In 1898 he stole away from his mere stall. Before the end of the year he was known to the world as the author of *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant.*

II

Nothing, then, could be clearer than that Mr. Shaw became a dramatist—not as a result of predilection—but simply because he was propelled into the part by circumstances. Once one realizes that, one also sees the huge unlikelihood of him turning out the born dramatist he claimed to be ; and, indeed, it could easily be shown that even his power "of conjuring up imaginary people in imaginary places and finding pretexts for theatrical scenes between them" (on which he plumes himself in the Preface to *Plays Pleasant*) is much more the novelist's dramatic knack than the playwright's, that his mere sense of the physically dramatic, taking that alone, is far from being the true sense of the theatre. But these initial, native deficiencies wouldn't have mattered so much if it hadn't been for that other element ; the grim fact that the very circumstances which had made him dramatist had simultaneously robbed him of his best right to be one. Be one, that is to say, in his own high sense of it —a maker of works of art depicting the daily life of the world, phials filled with essence of actuality. A man of his wit and force couldn't, of course, fail to contrive stage-pieces with a good deal more pith and picturesque-

ness about them than the majority of plays turned out by the class of brains the stage deserves; but anything bigger, anything adequate to his own definition, he had already forfeited the faculty to produce. He was trebly disqualified—and the first of these three handicaps stares out at us so brazenly from the record of his life that the wonder is it never warned him off; so plain is it indeed that it has visibly stamped itself into the framework of his house, making an ominous writing on the walls of his home. "*They say. What say they? Let them say.*" These are the words (his biographer tells us) that Mr. Shaw has had carved above the fire-place in his study. They are sufficiently significant. Admirable enough as the motto of a callow rebel, the old contemptuous Border battle-cry amounts to a surrender of his sword when heard on the lips of a dramatist. For, being interpreted, it really means that "I, the underseated, owner of this hygienic hearth, boast a deliberate lack of that imaginative sympathy which is the chief credential of the interpreter of character." And by sympathy, in this sense, one does not mean a slobbering pity; for pity can be as partial as contempt. By imaginative sympathy one simply means the jolly power of watching, with a chuckling absorption and delight, the doings of every sort and size of people; and of this happy gift, if ever he had it, Shaw by now had been wholly dispossessed. Sympathy is something hardly to be discerned in a man who has deliberately made disdain a working principle; who has learned to study human nature in the spirit of an opponent; and whose idea of "a generous passion" has become a "passion of hatred" for all the "accursed middle-class institutions that have starved, thwarted, misled and corrupted us from our cradles." *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner:* you cannot cut your enemy and know him too. That is a sort of vivisection that *is* fruitless. And Shaw

really admitted his own incapacity for play-writing when he affirmed that the average audience was a set of soapy stupids, "part of them nine-tenths chapel-goers by temperament, and the remainder ten-tenths blackguards." For the stage at its best is only a mirror held up before the face of the watching house. The big play is composed of little players; it must comprehend them even when they don't comprehend it.

That, then, is the first of Mr. Shaw's three acquired deficiencies; his socialism has made him unsociable: his confirmed habit of wiping somebody out, which he formed among the Fabians because it was so effective there, becomes here a disastrous obliteration of his model; he is like an archer (not William, though!) who has set up a target with care and then discovered it has used up all the wood meant for arrows. And now, on the top of it, driving it in further, comes acquired defect number two—one that limits still further his already narrowed range of subjects, and one that is all the more mischievous because it is masked by a quality that may have done much at the outset to convince him that drama was his line. All Shaw's early efforts as a writer were given, as we have seen, to the task of forming a medium of expression apt for physical utterance—a type of diction he could debate with and dictate with dogmatically, dealing it out from his hustings or stabbing it into his societies in successive sentences as pat and purposeful as neatly planted blows. Now, that meant good dialogue; and so, long before he had ever dreamt of turning dramatist, he had perfectly acquired the great trick which so many playwrights never do learn: the art of making all his words fit live lips and leap alertly off the tongue, as slick and natural as slang, fresh with the colours of actual intercourse. But whilst his platform-work thus taught him the acoustics of the stage and how to make his characters talk like human beings, it also confirmed

him in a foible which reacted on those characters to make them human beings of one particular kind. For the essence of his own speeches had been their slitting, pelting salience: it had been his work to resolve the old vague rumblings of oratory into a rattle of definite drops—and nothing, he found, sped a period so well as a core of cute meaning, self-contained. With the result that a crisp statement soon became essential to his sentences: he could no more begin to write one without an assertion to maintain it than a cabby could go a drive without a fare.

But though this confirmed inability to ask a question, or to suggest, or appeal, or submit, or discriminate, or qualify, or use art as a means of evocation, summoning a wisdom deeper than the artist knew he controlled—although this limitation was an immense asset on a platform, it obviously became a fatal barrier to completeness when the habitual asserter set to work to write a play. For it meant that the stage-door of his theatre had to be shut in the faces of a throng of very necessary characters; all the dim folk and foggy folk, the puzzled and perturbed, the groping, hoping, helpless, humble, unassertive humans, who act by instinct instead of by reason and whose deeds speak so much more clearly than their words—all these he was compelled to turn away. He couldn't employ them, for he couldn't equip them with a part. His sympathies, we have seen, were already limited—but even if he were filled with a positive affection for such characters he couldn't take them on—no, not even to take them off; for although he understood them they did not understand themselves; and for people who don't know their own minds and can't communicate the knowledge clearly, Shaw has no form of speech that will do. He can write none but definite dialogue; and definite dialogue entails definite minds; and the result is that all the members of his cast seem members of

one exclusive caste. *A specimen of the sensible, highly educated young Englishwoman; prompt, strong, confident, self-possessed. . . . A man of cool temperament and low but clear and keen intelligence, with the imperturbability of the accurate calculator who has no illusions. . . . A vigorous, genial, popular man of forty with a sound voice which he uses with the clean athletic articulation of the practised orator. . . . A dignified man, a born chairman of directors. . . . A strong man, with a watchful face. . . .* Pass them in parade, from Vivie Warren to Andrew Undershaft, and you find they have all had to be endowed with this rare faculty—a power of quick, precise, and ruthless calculation and self-confidence, the necessary adjunct to the way they'll have to speak. Each has a ready point of view, bright and finished as a rapier; and the drama has to resolve itself into the ring and rattle of these weapons, the multiplex duel we get when they all unsheathe their points and prettily proceed to cross opinions. What fun it is, how exciting it can be, we all, to our happiness, well know. But we have to admit that the mirror misses much. It is odd to reflect that his democracy is the cause of this exclusiveness.

III

Yet if these are serious handicaps I fear the third is even heavier. It was bad enough to be compelled to insist on his *dramatis personæ* all coming clearly provided with opinions; but what was worse was the fact that the exigencies of platform work had compelled him to add a pack of neat opinions to his own equipment, and that his haste and his innocence and the highly peculiar circle of his friends made the pack in many ways a faked one. "*To be set too early,*" says Meredith, somewhere, "*is to take the work out of the hands of the Sculptor who fashions men. A*

*character that does not wait for circumstances to shape it is of less worth in the race that must be run.*" Well, Shaw set too soon. The pressure of those early days of gleeful mutiny, the need for being dogmatic, precipitated his young ideas in a premature philosophy, to which ever since he has clung; and at the same time the material out of which he had to get his ideas, the personal experiences he turned into opinions, were quite unfairly lopsided, incomplete, artificial. The idiosyncrasy of his troupe he might to some extent have counterbalanced by picking their points of view with care and then arranging these so that they partly reproduced the pattern and poise of reality; but such ingenuity availed nothing whatever against the bias of his own point of view. He might (and he did) arrange his rapiers like spokes to look like a mimic Wheel of Life; but to no purpose, for the hub was out of truth. And it was out of truth because, quite literally, what he had taken as his centre was really eccentric, and what he had accepted in his innocence as a genuine axle was actually only a crank.

For remember, once more, where he was when he formed his views: remember the New Woman and *The Woman Who Did*, and the Ibsen Society and rational dress, and the general dank, indoor, stuffy, insincere atmosphere of devotees and defiance in which he formed his first impressions and made one. It was suburban in the worst sense—under the Town, shut in and overshadowed by its mass. "I am a typical Irishman," he once said, "my family came from Yorkshire." Actually, he is a typical Cockney: he came from the country before he had learned that Middlesex wasn't the middle; and what he ought to have said was: "I am a true Metropolitan: my views are so very provincial." Shut up in one pigeon-hole, he felt he was surveying the whole room; he took it for granted that the highly specialized existence he shared was a fair

sample of reality: he got his ideas of human society from the members of his societies; and innocently accepted the New Woman as woman. He knew nothing of the working North, nothing of pastoral England, nothing even of the genuine suburbs or the actual provinces, or the places where life does expand with some serenity, repeating its comeliest delights. Morris had had Kelmscott to use as a base, his grey manor with its immemorial beauties was his hub; and when he looked out from it he realized that Shaw's little London was a mere dirty splash on one of the spokes. But though Shaw took a Hertfordshire house many years later, and though a healthy Hibernian longing for the open has no doubt always been mixed with his motives, yet he never let that longing take him to his true kingdom; and his work has been far more a product of indoor dilettantism than that of Mr. Henry James. For Mr. James has travelled tirelessly, shedding old shibboleths and learning the non-existence of horizons; whereas Shaw has always remained complacently satisfied that his early contact with life was remarkably complete. He is constantly pluming himself on the breadth of his experience: "Like a greengrocer and unlike a minor poet, I have lived instead of dreaming and feeding myself with artistic confectionery." "Three times every week I could escape from artistic and literary stuff and talk seriously on serious subjects with serious people. *For this reason —because I persisted in Socialist propaganda—I never once lost touch with the real world.*" So does he point proudly to the bars of his prison and boast of how they keep reality before him. He honestly believed that a brisk debate with Mr. Belfort Bax brought him very near to the simple heart of human nature. He felt that he understood the democracy because he knew so many democrats.

It was as a Fabian meeting multiplied, then, that

Shaw first beheld the race of man; and his views of life were largely formed to fit this fascinating vision. Let me give one example of the way he generalized, of the way he accepted a suburban experience as a symbolical episode and framed a law on the strength of it which he promptly applied to the rest of creation. Let it be his theory of the relation of the sexes—of woman as the huntress and man as the prey. It reappears constantly, for it is one of the several steelyard rules which he can handle easier than golden ones; but its first appearance is in *The Philanderer*. Now we have the assurance of Mr. Shaw's biographer that *The Philanderer* exhibits an attitude towards women induced in Shaw by "unpleasant personal relations with women prior to the time at which the play was written. . . . The first act is a more or less accurate replica of a scene in Mr. Shaw's own life." There you have it! The core of *Man and Superman* is simply a twisted point of view manufactured out of the shoddy and unreliable material circumstances brought him when he had to take what he got to make opinions. Not all the adroitness in Ireland could overcome that initial drawback. He may declare that "Ann is Everywoman" as loudly as he will, and swear that her demonstration, that the initiative in sex transactions remains with women, is a piece of pure impartial drama, the result of "a creative process over which I have no control." We know better. Falsified from the commencement, the piece had to be a fantasy. It is one of the most delightful variety entertainments ever witnessed on the stage, but it holds no mirror up to life. What it reflects is an impatient youth of genius being impeded by a pack of spinsters who can't spin, the female intellectuals peculiar to a little patch of London (and a patch which has by now been ploughed and broken), and deciding that his predicament must be typical of Everyman's, that he has discovered a Universal

Law which nobody before him has had the honesty to announce. . . .

IV

Then his plays are an imposture? Pardon me, I never said so: what I say indeed is that he has acted with perfect sincerity, that all the errors in the result must be attributed to our time. It is because they are not a fair indictment that they do become a grave one. But then, on the other hand, it is when we realize their vices that we discover his true virtues. For the fine thing is this—and this the only use of critics' efforts—that once the limitations of the plays are realized they cease to possess any; once you see that Shaw has done the best he could for us under the circumstances, then his effort is seen in relation to those circumstances and its errors instinctively allowed for. Recognize that a passion for purity, gentleness, truth, justice, and beauty is the force at the base of all his teaching, and you will find his message one of the most tonic of our time. Realize further how he has limited himself by the philosophy he has expounded, and you will escape all danger of being hurt by its deficiencies. And instead of the irritation, the bewilderment, or (what was worse) the priggish complacency with which you regarded them, you find yourself turning to them with sympathy, with comradeship and eager friendliness, able to use all their strong medicine without being embittered by the taste. It is only when you regard them, in short (and this is the summary of the whole irony), it is only when you regard them with the very sympathy they doggedly deride that you receive the help which they hunger to offer.

*The Bookman*, 1913.

# THE MEEKNESS OF MR. RUDYARD KIPLING

*"You and Barrie and Kipling are now my Muses Three. And with Kipling, as you know, there are reservations to be made. . . ."*—R. L. S. *in a Letter to* HENRY JAMES.

## I

A WRITER'S reputation is often a premature ghost that soars up between him and his audience, bothering and blurring their vision; and in Mr. Kipling's case this exasperating doppel-ganger has proved specially pobby and impervious and full of energy. The autobiography it rattles off, convincingly enough, generally runs like this:—

"I came out of the East, a youngster of twenty, but wiser than your very oldest men. Life had shown me her last secrets, her unmentionable sins. I was as cool about them as a connoisseur towards curios, and I tossed you tales of twisted deaths and intricate adulteries with an air of indulgent half-contempt. I could do anything I liked with words, I had the nonchalant neatness of a conjuror; and in my splendid insolence (I was only twenty, mind you), I made Poetry learn slang, common sanguinary slang, and set her serving in canteens. 'Born blasé!' muttered one of your own writers, maddened—himself reckoned something of a prodigy. 'Too clever to live,' wrote another one, Stevenson. I was the cleverest young man of my day.

"And then I came West to your dingy, cosy

Babylon, tasted fame and flesh-pots and found them very good. And the brightness died out of my colours and the snap from my tunes. Your snug horizons hemmed me in, I lost my gift of shining vision. I relied contentedly on tricks I'd learned before. I wrote a bad novel, it became a worse drama. I made pots of money, I made party speeches, I spoiled my paints by mixing them with politics. And now here I am, sir, the popular favourite. —*Vide* Max.—Seen the *Post*? 'Save the King!"

Well, I want, in this essay, to pronounce all that pure perjury—to force aside the phantom and give you instead a glimpse of the real man behind. I want to suggest that, instead of depreciating, the quality of his work has continuously improved, that his literary technique has never been so amazing as now, nor his artistic integrity more Lutheran; and that, instead of being immensely precocious and worldly-wise—"born blasé," as Barrie (it was Barrie) once said—Kipling has always been, as much as Barrie himself, one of those blessed born innocents who never grow up, who are never quite at home in the world, but who wander through it, like Hawthorne or Poe, a little alien and elf-like, a little envious of "the happy folk in housen," and that this quality of envy of the practical grown-ups and genuine worldlings is, indeed, the essential characteristic of the man and the key to and core of his work.

## II

Now, to get the first glimmer of the ghost, to follow this Jekyll-and-Hyding from the outset, it is necessary to go back to the days of the *Departmental Ditties*—so swiftly did the severance begin. Many readers, not yet aged, will no doubt still remember

the stab and glitter of the first careful Kipling furore, and the way the critical raptures went rocketing up, breaking into a superior fire of epigrams, eager to announce the discovery. A new star had arisen, a rival to Loti, and the elect were at once in full song. Perhaps the hour was specially apt for such an overture. It was the hour of the 'eighties—the ineffable 'eighties—when a recondite vulgarity was the vogue; and æsthetic London was tremendously anxious to display its capacity for enjoying raw sensation. Dilettantism had deserted the Oxford of Walter Pater for "The Oxford" of Marie Lloyd and Walter Sickert. If you were a poet you were ashamed not to be seen in cabmen's shelters; and a little hashish was considered quite the thing. Oh, a superior hour! And so when the rag-time chords of the *Departmental Ditties* flicked and snapped an introduction to the laconic patter of the coloured *Plain Tales from the Hills*, and when the tingling *Tales* themselves, with their parakeets and ivory, their barbaric chic and syncopated slang, provided qualities reminiscent in fairly equal parts of exotic Eastern prints and East-End music-halls—then the "ten superior persons scattered through the universe" were naturally persuaded that their hour had found its very voice—

"'Er petticoat was yaller and 'er little cap was green,
And 'er name was Supi-yaw-lat—jes' the same as Theebaw's queen;
An' I see 'er first a-smokin' of a whackin' white cheroot,
An' a-wastin' Christian kisses on an 'eathen idol's foot:
Bloomin' idol made o' mud
Wot they called the great Gawd Budd—
Plucky lot she cared for idols when I kissed her where she stood."

It seemed the last delicious insolence of æsthetics: bizarrerie of the best. The youngster was bracketed

with Beardsley. Mr. John Lane began to collect his first editions. Mr. Richard le Gallienne was told off to Bodley Head him. Mr. Edmund Gosse (this is perfectly true, I assure you), Mr. Gosse himself wrote almost tremblingly of "the troubling thrill, the voluptuous and agitating sentiment," which this artist's audacious words sent through his system. The little sun-baked books from Allahabad seemed, if anything, more golden than *The Yellow Book*. The test of the literary epicures became their capacity for properly savouring the subtle Kipling liqueur. . . .

And then the exasperating fellow went popular.

III

What do you call the apostles of the Cubists? Cubicles? Very well then. Just consider the consternation of the cubicles if the general public began to clamour for Picassos. Think even of Mr. Roger Fry's chagrin if we made a popular favourite of Matisse. A consternation not dissimilar, I am perfectly sure, shuddered through the initiates of the 'nineties. I don't suggest, of course, that the masked paling of critical approval, the soft extinction of the starrier estimates, was *entirely* due to the widening blaze of popularity; but even critics are human, and it helped. It was impossible to watch their precious liqueur being drained like mere Bass without beginning to entertain doubts as to its quality. It was felt that the public's enjoyment of Kipling was too true to be good. Criticism grew querulous, qualified, hedged; Criticism discovered defects.

The defects it discovered, the demands which it made, and the balking effect of all these hedges on Mr. Kipling's career, I will consider in a moment. What I want to insist on, first, is the entire wholesomeness of that popularity. It was—and is remaining—healthy

and sound. There is probably no living writer who is regarded, in England, with such widespread and spontaneous veneration. It is the nearest thing we have nowadays to the reverence that used to be excited by the great literary figures of last century. It is touching, it is beautiful, it is altogether honest, real, and good. Bank clerks and clerics, doctors and drapers, journalists, joiners, engineers—they all speak of this man and his work much as another kind of people speak of Wagner. Only, honestly. There is no priggishness about it, nor any desire either to impress or be improved; and yet they find beauty in his work, they find magic and strangeness, and they find hints of inscrutable forces and mysterious powers, and constant reminders of something unimaginable beyond; they experience that rich commotion of the blood we call romance, and are thrilled and renewed by it much as others of us are supposed to be thrilled and renewed by past poetry. And at the same time, unlike so much of their "romancing," it is never a mere dallying with lotus-land sensations, a coloured refuge from the drudgery of day. Its action is always to excite their zest for actual life, to send them back into reality more exultantly—not because of any particular philosophy it may teach, any "gospel of work" or the like, but simply because it names and uses, and irresistibly sanctifies, the actual trite tools of each man's trade. Much has been written of Mr. Kipling's capacity for picking up knowledge from technical experts; far too little of the lessons the experts learned from him. He has renewed the workman's pride in his work and restored their mystery to the crafts. I believe he has done more than any man of his time to make the middle-classes less dully middle-class. . . .

But all this the ten superior ones were in no position to foresee. Said they, "*Yellow Book*?—we meant, of course, Yellow Press." Said they, "But

this fellow really likes the music-hall!" And to him, "Oh, yes; these little tales are very clever, very neat, you know—De Maupassant and Poe and all that. But before we can take you seriously you must produce a full-length novel. This is striking—but, is it Art?"

IV

And all the time the real Kipling had been as little moved, one avers, by a desire to pander to the great public as by a wish to *épater* it. Essentially a dreamer, born in exile, he was absolutely innocent of all the coolly cockahoop motives and traits men ascribed to him—he pretended to have them, in fact, just because he was so shy. It was an accident of environment, and a streak of naughty pride, and a sort of simple homely emulation, that really determined his first choice of tone and topic—the hot-blooded topics and the sang-froid tone of those complicated *Plain Tales from the Hills.* He hadn't the faintest notion of reverencing the common soldier. But he badly wanted the soldier to reverence the pen. What egged him on was the kind of humiliating half-resentment from which so many writers necessarily suffer most. Like Mr. Shaw's affectation of ferocity, like Mr. Maurice Hewlett's early hectics, most of his first work was just the artist's human retort to that intolerable tolerance with which the workers, the doers, fighters, men of action, regard his anæmic indoor trade. It was Beetle's way of enforcing respect at Westward Ho! It was young Kipling's way of adjusting things at Simla. He would prove that ink can be thicker than blood and the pen even more daring than the sword; and that a certain small spectacled sub-editor fond of poetry was not quite the innocent lamb that he looked. And so he picked up tales in the bazaars and the barracks, and nebulously Bret Hartened them

and pointed them with Poe; and then wrote them out, with infinite cunning, in a hand like an indifferent drawl. One of the most effective ways of out-Heroding Herod is to yawn wearily when the head is brought in. Mr. Kipling's yawn was a masterpiece. His make-up was perfect, the deception complete. The mess-rooms were duly impressed. . . .

But masks are dangerous things to play with: a little unexpected pressure, and they may permanently mould the face beneath. Could Kipling have been left alone after that soothing Simla success, he might, indeed, quietly sheltered, have now softly discarded his disguise and let his instincts find their native expression. But there leapt out upon him from Europe our roar of applause, and that riveted him to his rôle. Even the dabs of deprecation, the raps from the falling rocket-sticks, perversely whipped him in the same direction. "You can write these little tales," said we, "but are you knowing enough to write long ones?" He did *not* know enough: he was never meant to be a novelist; but even less was he adapted for turning the other cheek to taunts: he set his teeth, took up the challenge, tugged the mask a little more tightly, and produced *The Light that Failed*. It did fail: and the critics who had really provoked it had their moment of mean triumph. But by now the youngster's pride was in pledge: he would write a brilliant novel if it broke him; and for ten years he passionately fought out fresh perfections of technique, using his artificially acquired violence to hammer out new details of equipment, until at length by dint of sheer virtuosity he achieved the protracted tale called *Kim*. He himself, it is said, considers *Kim* his masterwork; I cannot regard it as that. I think he has done better work since, but it was certainly distinguished enough to enable him, with complete justification, to regard it as his second vindication. Thenceforward, if I see it

aright, his work was one long loyal effort on the part of his newly freed faculties to loosen the bars they had built round themselves and gradually to twist an inappropriate and stifling technique into a fitting house for their deeper desires.

V

For certainly it is in the books that followed *Kim*—it is in *Traffics and Discoveries*, *Actions and Reactions*, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, *Rewards and Fairies*, and the concurrent verse—that we begin to see most clearly the presence of this subterranean disharmony and heroic sense feud. If the reader will take these four books and consider them apart; if he will let their particular characteristics form a fresh picture in his mind, an honest image of the kind of man he must have been who wrote them; and if he will apply this graphic reagent to the books that came before *Kim*, he will see how extraordinarily it eats out and reveals their accidentals. The forced notes tumble out with a tinkle, the falsities fade, there is a linking up of scattered touches, unrelated before, and certain qualities, hitherto hardly recognized as crucial, rise glittering like veins. We get a fundamental filigree, a clear resultant mesh, which is a map of Kipling's mind.

Now of this fundamental Kipling the cardinal qualities are three. The first (*a*) is an overpowering passion for definition—a spiritual horror of vagueness that almost amounts to a desperate fear—a hunger for certitude and system. The second (*b*) is the artistic counterpart and imaginative instrument of the first · a prodigious mental capacity, namely, for enforcing design, for compelling coherence, for stamping insubstantial dream-stuff into shapes as clear-cut and decisive as newly milled and minted metal discs. And the third (*c*), on the physical plane, is the manual counter-

part of these: a cunning craftsman's gift for fitting these crisp units into complex patterns, adjusting them like the works of a watch, with an exquisite accuracy, performing miracles of minute mechanical perfection.

These are the three faculties, often bitted and strained, that form everywhere the sinews of his work. Take the so-called technical elements of his style. "There is a writer called Stevenson," he once wrote admiringly, "who makes the most delicate inlay-work in black-and-white and files out to the fraction of a hair." His own work is even freer from fluff or haze or slackness. The rhythms run with a snap from stop to stop; every sentence is as straight as a string; each has its self-contained tune. Prise one of them out of its place and you feel it would fall with a clink, leaving a slot that would never close up as the holes do in woollier work. Replace it, and it locks back like type in a forme, fitting into the paragraph as the paragraph fits into the tale. There are no glides or grace-notes, or blown spray of sound. Most prose that loves rhythm yields its music like a mist, an emanation that forms a bloom on the page, softly blurring the partitions of the periods. Kipling's prose shrinks stiffly from this trustfulness. The rhythms must report themselves promptly, prove their validity, start afresh after the full stop. Lack of faith, if you like—but also, it must be admitted, a marvellously unremitting keenness of craftsmanship. And it is the same with the optical integers as its third. Sudden scenes stud his page like inlaid stones. "*The leisurely ocean all patterned with peacocks' eyes of foam.*" "*I swung the car to clear the turf, brushed along the edge of the wood, and turned in on the broad stone path to where the fountain basin lay like one star-sapphire.*" "*When his feet touched that still water, it changed, with a rustle of unrolling maps, to nothing less than a sixth quarter of the globe, with islands coloured yellow and blue, their letter-*

*ing strung across their faces.*" And these are no mere decorations. The tales are gemmed—but as watches are jewelled; it is round these tense details that the action revolves. What is the emotional axis of *The Finest Story in the World*? It is that "*silver wire laid along the bulwarks which I thought was never going to break.*" Are we to know that a man was struck dumb? Then "*just as the lightning shot two tongues that cut the sky into three pieces . . . something wiped his lips of speech as a mother wipes the milky lips of her child.*" The motive of all his tales, as of *At the End of the Passage*, is a picture seen in a lens. Even the shadowy outer influences that brood over Kim's life, the inscrutable Powers that move in its background, come to us first in designs as vivid and dense as the devices of heraldry—as a Red Bull on a Green Field, as a House of Many Pillars; and before the close are resolved into the two most definite, clean-cut, and systematic of all earthly organizations: the military mechanism of India and the precise apparatus of Freemasonry. Kipling must have pattern and precision—and he has the power as well as the will. He can crush the sea into a shape as sharp as a crystal, can compress the Himalayas into a little lacquer-like design, has even, in *The Night Mail* —that clean, contenting piece of craftsmanship—printed a pattern on the empty air. He is primarily a pattern-maker; and the little pieces thus obtained he builds into a larger picture still. As the sentence into the paragraph—as the paragraph into the page—so do these sharp-edged items click together to form the geometrical pattern called the plot.

"The pattern called the plot." It is here that we come very close to the irony that has ruled and wrenched his career. Switch this imperatively map-making, pattern-making method upon the third element in fiction, the element of human nature, and what is the inevitable result? Inevitably, there is the same

sudden stiffening and formulation. The characters spring to attention like soldiers on parade; they respond briskly to a certain description; they wear a fixed suit of idiosyncrasies like a uniform. A mind like this *must* use types and set counters; it feels dissatisfied, ineffective, unsafe, unless it can reduce the fluid waverings of character, its flitting caprices and twilit desires, to some tangible system. The characters of such a man will not only be definite; they will be definitions. His heroes will be courage incarnate; his weak men will be unwaveringly weak; and those who are mixed will be mixed mathematically, with all their traits clearly related to and explained by some neat blend of blood and race and caste behind. Is not all this true of Kipling's characters? They are marked by a strange immobility. They strike certain attitudes —and retain them. Mulvaney, Ortheris, and Learoyd live long but never alter; Kim never grows up. And indeed it is this very fixity that makes the short stories so effective. Their maker took these frozen gestures, rigid faces, and tense attitudes, and fitted them together to form his effect; and, whilst the inflexibility was exactly what he needed for his mosaic-work, for making the sudden star called the story, the very tension of the details ("life seen by lightning-flashes" some one called them) seemed to prove the piercing realism of the writer. It was only when he tried to construct a long novel with them that the stiffness of these details turned to obstinacy, and their numbness became a kind of death. A short tale can be told in tableau—but a novel is not a long short tale. The pattern of *The Light that Failed* is every bit as neat as the most successful of the *contes*, but it is the static symmetry of decoration and stained glass. It is applied art—that is to say, misapplied art. Its logic is not that of life. The characters are stowed into the interstices of a pre-arranged design that relies upon them remaining fixed quantities.

Perceive, then, the maddening position! The very qualities that made the first tales tell, that seemed to prove his supreme capacity for fiction, are exactly the qualities that cut him off from the ability to write novels. The novelist is essentially the explorer, the questioner, the opener of doors; and the only law of human nature he knows is that the exception is the rule. But Mr. Kipling's first word is obedience; he is all for rules and rivets; for regularity and a four-square plan. Born under the sign of the Balance, his emblem is the compass and the square—and it is not with tools like these that men's motives can be measured. His vision of the world, like his Lama's, is a well-made Wheel of Life with a neat niche for the individual; and even his famous militarism, his worship of the apparatus of war, is nothing more, in essence, than a longing for quiet comeliness and order. It is the mind, if you like, of a martinet—incapable therefore of complete imaginative sympathy. Any lapse from efficiency fills his craftsman's nature with disgust, and the only characters he can handle with perfect satisfaction are the Stricklands, the Mowglis, the Kims, as unconquerably capable as machines. His voice, indeed, is never so tolerant and human as when he is dealing with heroes and heroines that are not human at all—with beasts and ships and polo-ponies, or those odd little half-animals called children. His *Jungle Books* are among his best, because here a psychology as elementary as Æsop's serves to convey the effect of an unusual understanding. A like reason gives its race and richness to his dialogue the moment it takes refuge in a dialect. For dialect, in spite of all its air of ragged lawlessness, is wholly impersonal, typical, fixed, the code of a caste, not the voice of an individual. It is when the novelist sets his characters talking King's English that he really puts his capacity for reproducing the unconventional and capricious on

its trial. Mr. Kipling's plain conversations are markedly unreal. But honest craftsmanship and an ear for strong rhythms have provided him with many suits of dialects. And with these he dresses the talk till it seems to surge with character.

And so, in this way and in that, the actual words which he wrote joined in the conspiracy to keep him toiling on hopefully after that *ignis fatuus* of fiction. Until at length he made his supreme effort, fitted all the lore he had gathered—the sharp-set scenes, the well-cut dialects, the crisp impressions of life—into a single ingenious zoetrope—set it whirling on one of the spindles of the Indian machine, the secret spindle called the Great Game—and so created that spirited illusion of a novel which we know as *Kim*.

## VI

Thenceforward his work in prose has been a wonderful attempt to make his qualities cure their natural defects —to make sharpness and bright neatness produce their natural opposites—depth and shimmer and bloom. And by dint of an incomparable dexterity he has succeeded. There is no space left me now to trace the process with completeness—but, roughly, it may be described as an attempt to superimpose, as when you furl a fan, all the elements which in *Kim* had been laid side by side. The best example is perhaps *Rewards and Fairies*. If the reader will turn back to those wise fairy-tales he will see that each is really four-fold: a composite tissue made up of a layer of sunlit story (Dan's and Una's plane), on a layer of moonlit magic (plane of Puck), on a layer of history-story stuff (René's plane and Gloriana's), on a last foundation of delicately bedimmed but never doubtful allegory. And he will note, too, the exquisite precision of the correspondences, a kind of practical punning, so that the self-same object

plays a different part in every plane. One instance will suffice. Puck kicks a bunch of scarlet toadstools idly. Why? Simply so that the red colour may stain back through all the textures till it matches, in the third, with the name of Rufus. This is not the mere swagger of virtuosity. These superimpositions produce a very beautiful imposture. They give the tales an opalescence that had hitherto seemed foreign to his work. They give them the milkiness of a magic crystal and make them by far the completest symbols of life he has yet produced. These fairy-tales for children are far more realistic than the *Plain Tales from the Hills*. For half of life is moonlit, and the image that would copy it exactly must be vague.

Nor is this all. If there be any logic in the lines of effort we have traced it is not here they find their consummation: they leap forward through this magic haze, emerge beyond it strangely clarified; they make it impossible not to believe that this woven obscurity, this new delicate dimness, is indeed but a curtain—a mist—not of dusk, but of dawn—that will dissolve to reveal Kipling carving his true masterwork. Released at last from the conventions thrust upon it by pride and accident and the impertinences of criticism, his system-seeking genius can now openly take up its true task, the task it has hitherto attempted only intermittently, and begin the sustained practice of that colossal kind of craftsmanship for which it is so singularly suited. It will beat out for itself a new form of imaginative prose, as unclogged by characterization as his verse. The devices of drama it will use no doubt, and some of the tricks of narration; but its true medium will be massed impersonal things —tangles of human effort—the thickets of phenomena —the slow movements of industry, so muffled to the average eye—the general surge and litter of sensation. What his genius can do with material of this kind we

have already in some sort seen. Driving into the darkness that beleaguers us, swirling and thrusting like a searchlight in a forest, it could bring out the essential structure of events and display the soaring pillars of contemporary achievement. It might not be the perfect definition; it might tend too much to turn the tides into firm floors, the branching constellations into rafters; but it would be enormously exhilarating. It would give toil a conscious habitation; and like actual architecture, like statuary, like all firm material forms, it would create the very emotions it lacks the power to reproduce.

*The Bookman*, 1912.

# THE AMBITIONS OF SIR JAMES BARRIE, BART.

"*But Barrie is a beauty*, The Little Minister *and* The Window in Thrums, *eh? Stuff in that young man; but he must see and not be too funny. Genius in him, but there's a journalist at his elbow—there's the risk.*"—R. L. S. in a Letter to HENRY JAMES, 1892.

## I

"QUALITY STREET" is for "the quality"—let that be claimed, or confessed, right away. It is no book for your parvenu, your reader born yesterday, or for those frightfully clever young creatures, so precocious and cool, who take their first literary airings, quite self-possessed, in such new-fangled, strenuous, agitating thoroughfares as *Sinister Street* or *The Street of To-day*. Far away from these does it lie, in a different quarter of the town, in a mellow, faded faubourg full of dreams; and only those can understand it who know something of its history, who remember the old lane which it led from and the hidden highway it joined, and who can recollect all the hopes which ran to make a breathless crowd round the little architect when he took the site in hand. Detach the book from these things and judge it intrinsically and you get—pooh!—a mere pretty game—a kind of make-believe bijou, absurdly befurbelowed, planned out, with droll seriousness, like a real four-roomed play—and then built, bless your heart, on a plot more like a child's garden-plot than a dramatic one—a plot from which the very plants have not even been cleared away, so that the place seems furnished with

flower-beds instead of sensible feather ones, and lavender and marjoram and rosemary keep tripping the feet of the characters, turning their movements into a mere minuet. The tenant's name is Miss Phœbe, and in one of these absurd rooms she is represented as keeping a school—a further suggestion being that one day, grown aweary of teaching, she pretends to be her own non-existent niece (did any one ever hear of such nonsense now?) in order to attract an escort to a Ball (immoral too, it will be seen), and succeeds so well in her duplicity (though she merely shakes her curls free from her cap) that the very neighbours are deceived and her bosom friends imposed on, and all the swains who mildly scorned her when she sat sedately in Room I fall transfixed when they meet her in Room II. "A pretty trifle, but unreal. The diction, mock Georgian. The action, as artificial as the dialogue. The famous Barrie-tone of which I have always heard so much would appear in reality to be a simple treble." So might a new surveyor sum it up, and snap his notebook to with brisk decision—smiling indulgently when, on glancing up, he sees the unnecessarily jealous way we have been watching all his movements.

But to us of the old guard—how much more it is than that! It is a treasure-house of heirlooms, a store of lavendered delights; and Life flows between the frail walls almost furiously. Every article has its history, memories race from room to room, each word uttered is a bait to bring more scampering; and the very touches that to alien eyes must seem most artificial affect us like the friendly touches of kind hands. We recognize the very schoolroom, for example: "the blue-and-white room" where Miss Susan listens with a fearful joy to a friend reading romances from the library and where, if you are a caller, you will certainly be requested timidly to be so obliging as to stand on

a newspaper to save the carpet. For is not this the very room, with the identical colour-scheme ("everything in it blue, or white, or both"), wherein Miss Ailie, years and years ago, kept the Hanky School at Thrums and listened with delicious shame to a certain Tommy reading gloatingly borrowed love-stories full of Words We Have No Concern With? To be sure it is! And Miss Phœbe's curls? Are Miss Kitty's, of course! And Patty the maid? Dagont, it's Gavinia! And Patty's follower? Corp himsel', by all that's michty, disguised as an English sergeant! The whole thing is a rally of *revenants*. It reminds us of the old doings in the Den. And not from one book alone do the figures come trooping; nor do they shrink from exchanging characteristics. Miss Susan, to put us off, employs a trick of Tammas Haggart's. Livvy, again, is only Timothy. The little boy who weeps bitterly because Miss Phœbe fails to cane him is borrowing beforehand one of the deeds of little David—the little David of *The Little White Bird*. The large S chalked on Georgy's tiny waistcoat may remind us, with one wriggle, of Mr. Cathro branding Tommy—but it curls its other tail towards "Little Mary." Phœbe herself is pure Grizel when she cries "Oh you *sweet!*" but she is Babbie when she works mischief at the Ball. It is a masked meeting and medley of characters dead and unborn, a *bal masqué* of bygones and about-to-be's. . . .

And the initiates who can see this see something more. They understand why this assemblage is convened. The thing is a conspiracy, the blue-and-white room a dark rendezvous: creeping together so cunningly, with their false names and swapped noses, these characters are here to hatch a plot. They state loudly that the year is 1815. It is really a second and subtler '45. They all talk ostentatiously of the defeat of Napoleon. It is to drown the fact that England is in peril. A Scotch raid is in progress, unconscious

London is threatened, and this demure dame's-school in the shires, apparently so innocent, is an ambush where the ringleader gathers his forces and perfects his final preparations.

*Quality Street*, in other words, is part of the Great North Road, half-way between Thrums and Kensington Gardens. And down it the discerning eye detects with a thrill a small shy figure pounding determinedly South. The figure's name does not appear among the dramatis personæ. But there is a certain red light in his eye that betrays him. It is the author of *Sentimental Tommy* running to write *The Little White Bird*. Like his famous hero, he has once more "found a way."

II

It is a fascinating thing, this progress of Tommy—I mean Barrie: the way he has diffidently (but oh, how obstinately!) worked and wriggled along his form until at length he reached his proper place. The fashionable thing to say about him now is that he has "never grown up." It is intended for praise, but it is a terribly tame version of the actual process which lies behind his career. The amazing thing about him is that he *has* grown, grown incessantly; but instead of growing up, has grown down. His case is like Alice's. When first he set up his easel on the banks of the Quharity his intention was to paint the simple truth: if the reader will glance back at his earliest canvases, the opening studies in the *Auld Licht Idylls*, he will see that their manner is the sober circumstantial one of Galt, with perhaps just a touch of Thoreau, the Thoreau of the *Winter's Walk* and a trace of the Stevenson of *Pastoral*. They are not "idylls" at all: the word was surely used ironically. The artist's idea was to show us, with a dogged Dutch fidelity, the dour reality of

our sentimentalized Arcadie. He would bring out the slowness of these weavers and their ludicrous love-making; he would paint "the dull vacant faces" of the Tammas Haggarts and Pete Lunans as pitilessly as any Degas drawing washerwomen.

> You could generally tell an Auld Licht in Thrums when you passed him, his dull vacant face wrinkled over a heavy wob. He wore tags of yarn round his trousers beneath the knee, that looked like ostentatious garters, and frequently his jacket of corduroy was put on beneath his waistcoat. If he was too old to carry his load on his back, he wheeled it on a creaking barrow, and when he met a friend they said "Ay, Jeames," and "Ay, Davit," and then could think of nothing else.

But as he worked, there came a change. Tammas began to grow eldritch. Pete became a quaint gnome. Gnarled idiosyncrasies sprouted, the stolid features swelled or shrank, Thrums grew into a goblin market, all quirks and wynds and cobbles, its weavers were a race of hob-nailed elves: "As unlooked for as a telegram," admitted Barrie himself (in *Margaret Ogilvy*), "there came to me the thought that there was something quaint about my native place. A boy who had found a knife in his pocket could not have been more surprised." That expresses the suddenness perfectly—but not the nature of the impulse. What he discovered in his pocket was not a knife. It was (I am convinced) a little bottle containing a philtre with the unforgetable flavour of "mixed cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffee, and hot buttered toast," and labelled DRINK ME in large letters. And standing there, on the bank of the Quharity, he drained it desperately, and at once began to shrink. He dwindled, he sped downwards, till he pierced the surface of the pool; and there he was, safe at last, beside his own reflection, in the mimic world of make-believe, so quaint and queer and comical, so wanton and so

wee, which had caught his eye and winked at him as he stood a-painting in the upper world and felt a sudden sinking of the heart. He had dived.

Now, why did he dive? For precisely the reason that made another novelist, Sandys, fling *himself* convulsively into this identical stream in the ninth chapter of *Tommy and Grizel*. Because he feared sentiment. And if you press me further and ask why he was afraid of sentiment, I am afraid I must just make a clean breast of it, fellow-countryman though I am, and confess that it was because he was a Scot. But do not misunderstand this: do not take it to mean that he shrank from sentiment because, as a Scot, he hated it. It was the opposite of that: Barrie feared sentiment because, being a Scot, he loved the seductive thing too well. Ours is a queer country. Caresses being rare in it, we gloat furtively over the idea of them. Prettiness and daintiness seldom appearing among our dour, bare-backit hills, it is we who write passionate poems in praise of tiny daisies and gemmy-eyed field-mice. Endearments and graces which you think nothing of in the South, making free with them with a wondrous hardihood every day, are invested for us with a dark, dreadful deliciousness; there is a real correspondence between the queer numerousness of Lowland chance-children, the way our Burnses treat their Jeans, and the excessive way Barrie makes his Grizel rock her arms ecstatically and cry out constantly "Oh, you *sweet*!" Forbidden to use these dear diminutives in her dour daily life, Scotland makes her poets use them for her: the Barries and the Burnses are urchins whom she sends to rob the orchard she won't touch herself, so that she may at any rate enjoy herself by proxy, with a queer vicarious voluptuousness, watching them munching the forbidden fruit shamelessly, full in the world's face, all day long. And Barrie felt the impulse. The moment he began to write, it

tugged at his pen, tempting it in prohibited directions; he wrestled for a while and then let himself go and fairly wallowed in that thing Ailie called Words We Have No Concern With. For a book or two he simply turned the tears on and off insatiably, like a lad who sees taps for the first time. He even set Lang Tammas greeting: "his mouth worked convulsively, and he sobbed, crying, 'Nobody kent it, but mair than mortal son, O God, did I love the lad'" —the lad being his well-matured minister. You Southerners felt uneasy—and indeed you had some cause. Mr. Arnold Bennett lifted up his voice and pointed out the dangerous sickliness of " that excessively profitable lump of sweet-stuff *The Little Minister.*" We were reminded, a minute ago, of Dominie Cathro branding Tommy. Destiny seemed to be on the point of doing the same to Barrie, marking his forehead with the fatal sign S. B. It was the approach of that dread finger that drove Barrie to the Bottle. He drank—he shrank—he ducked—he disappeared. He left reality behind him and leaped into the land where he could satisfy his wicked craving without shame—the land where prettiness is proper and make-believe is truth—where the official language is entirely formed of Words We Have No Concern With, and a kiss is no more thought of than—a thimble.

III

Of Barrie's travels and adventures in that Never-Never Land of elvishness one could easily write a breathless book; but our concern just now is mainly with that particular part of the journey which led him at last up into *Quality Street.* He had a glorious time down there—yet I would have you think of him throughout it all as longing, longing, as wistfully as any other mortal lost in fairyland, for some means of

getting back to upper earth. He had got separated from his earthly shadow—which had by now gone up to London: he wanted his art to join his body there, and endless were the dodges he employed to coax his genius to go back to mortal ways. One of the best was when he persuaded his mother to come to the edge of his pool and look down. When the reflection of her face touched his art, it gave a great leap and lived gloriously in the upper sunlight for a little. We call that moment *Margaret Ogilvy*, and still regard it as one of the noblest of his books. Another device consisted of selecting some Thrums character with whom his talent was already familiar, and then craftily sending that character off by train to London. This was done with Rob Angus, the Thrums millwright's lad (you will find the full account of it in *When a Man's Single*). But, no—the art wouldn't follow. It would only consent to join Rob's story when the characters turned impish—in Noble Simms's room, for instance, beneath that Japanese umbrella; or among the mad members of The Wigwam. From all the others, the real grown-ups—Colonel Abinger, Sir Clement Dowton, Miss Meredith—his art held obstinately aloof. When he tried to write seriously he only wrote rubbish; it was when he wrote Tommy-rot that he was great. The sentimental chapters in *When a Man's Single* are discomfiting even to-day.

Rob knew that Mary loved him. An awe fell upon him. "What am I?" he cried, and Mary put her hand in his. "Don't, dear," she said, as his face sank on it; and he raised his head and could not speak.

The colonel sighed, and his cheeks were red. His head sank upon his hands. He was young again, and walking down an endless lane of green with a maiden by his side, and her hand was in his. They sat down by the side of a running stream. Her fair head lay on his shoulder, and she was his wife. The

colonel's lips moved as if he were saying to himself words of love, and his arms went out to her who had been dead this many a year, and a tear, perhaps the last he ever shed, ran down his cheek.

Much as we love our Barrie we have to admit that words like these are writ in butter. We are embarrassed as by an impropriety. And of course he guessed the danger, knew his weakness. He could not resist these occasional orgies (for he did so want to write real, grown-up romance), but whenever he felt the seizure was getting too severe he used to take to the Bottle. He would counteract the tear with a smile, end the orgy with an antic, dose the emotion desperately till it dwindled and grew quaint.

An osier wand dipped into the water under a weight of swallows, all going to bed together. The boy on the next house-boat kissed his hand to a broom on board the *Tawny Owl*, taking it for Mrs. Meredith's servant, and then retired to his kitchen smiling.

Our relief is so great that we welcome it almost hysterically: the situation is saved with a laugh. But this was obviously a kind of game, like playing with fire, that could not go on for long. It tended to turn these early books into a teasing alternation of risk and rescue ("when he is neither humorous nor pathetic he is nothing," said Mr. Bennett; "imagine a diet all salt and sugar!"), so that the reader never knew what attitude he was expected to adopt. With one sentence you were in Fleet Street, the next took you into fairyland. Stevenson, as we have seen, blamed "the journalist at Barrie's elbow." It was not that, it was the influence of Thrums. But something, plainly, would have to be done in the old wicked way, until it had to be called off in terror, hastily dosed with Alice's mixture, and set to some absurdity so as to pass off the excesses with a laugh.

Well, we know now that there was only one way of escape from his underworld—and that was up through the crystal lid of the Round Pond. He could only be allowed back to real life again if he consented to come companioned and guarded by babies: he had to steal into our world once more at that extremest verge of it, on the very edges of Elfland, where everything is quaint and small already—there the houses are dolls' houses, and the mortals all wee, and capriciousness rules, and all things are elfin, and Grizel could rock her arms and smile her crooked smile and run no risk of being rebuked by Arnold Bennetts.

But until the day he found that out Barrie made few luckier sallies than the one that brought him bobbing up in Phœbe's schoolroom. The idea will be evident. It was a kind of back-stairs. He would creep into England through an unguarded postern, through an entrance a hundred years old; and then, having accustomed his forces to 1815, would creep down the years towards To-day. Many reasons made the ruse a good one. When he wrote grown-up modern English, the critics complained that it was stilted. Well, in Georgian days, seemingly, words always walked on little stilts: and so his own would pass muster there perfectly. Then, again, there was the schoolroom—and he had already begun to realize that his genius got on oddly well with youngsters. And finally there were all the darling quirks of decorum and costume—the ringlets and crinolines—the curtsies and chintz—the Whimsy cakes, pattens, and blue-and-white porcelain—toys and treasures no fairy-bred art could resist, and no merely mortal-bred art use so well.

Small wonder then that *Quality Street*, though it proved in part a *cul-de-sac*, made his genius feel perfectly at home. He had to fall back from it, take to his mines again, continue his subterranean galleries till they stretched beneath Kensington and he could

drive a shaft up into the Gardens after closing-time, instead of clattering into London (as once he had hoped) along the Great North Road of real romance. But he learned a lot while he was there, his art acquired many graces, taking lessons in deportment from Phœbe, improving on the Hanky School code, and, generally, preparing itself unconsciously for the great day when it would be entrusted with the tender character of little David. And it was very happy. In and out the little houses, in and out Miss Phœbe's curls, in and out the *vastly's* and *devoutly's*, the *quizzings* and the *'twas's*, it darts and struts and tumbles with the utmost innocence of zest. Nor, given such an opportunity, does it fail, you may be sure, to play its master's favourite game of Lost Identities. You know that game, of course? It is played in all Barrie's books. Somebody pretends to be somebody else, or pretends that nobody is somebody—with the result that there is always a redundant identity, a spare *alter ego*, a mysterious, invisible Being wandering round, that has somehow, with laughter and cunning, to be dodged or reconciled or explained. It was playing this game so hard that made Captain Hook's voice (if you remember) sound so remarkably like Wendy's father's. It was over this game that Miss Irene Vanbrugh, in *Rosalind*, doubled her charms by being two people at once. Then there was Peter Pan's shadow; there was the disembodied Timothy; there were William Paterson, and Tink-a-bell, and "my brother Henry" in *My Lady Nicotine*—Beings, *alter ego's*, every one. Little Mary herself (or itself?). The wistful girl in Grizel's mirror. Captain Stroke. The face that haunted Marriot. The second Sir Clement Dowton. And now, in *Quality Street*, a heroine who does not exist, the lovely but non-existent Livvy.

It would be strange, indeed, if such a foible did not betoken something deeper—and we readers who are

old loyalists, who have mounted each succeeding Barricade, know perfectly well that it does. We have always realized that long ago, at the outset of his career, Barrie's own character split into two—the one half a solemn aspirant, tremendously aware of the dignity of Letters, worshipping portraits of Great Writers with all the grim Scotch ambitiousness and taking as his motto Cowley's

*What shall I do to be for ever known*
*And make the age to come my own?*

—the other half an incurable lover of the pretty and the prankish, who kept using the pen that hoped for such power as a mere agent for indulging in games. To and fro behind his sentences these two have always chased and tussled; Lost Identities is but the shadow-show they cast. Sometimes the serious artist holds the stage defiantly; oftener the other ego pops up and makes him laugh; sometimes the small mocker, weary of make-believe, can be heard pattering forlornly through the pages crying pathetically for his brother. And there is a touch of tragedy in the situation: genius is a cruel gift. To grow down when half your dreams have been of growing gigantic, to dwindle when you long passionately to tower, to find your feet perversely trotting off to the Round Pond to play with children when you had ordered them to mount the granite staircase that leads to lasting Fame—this must often have made Gavin Ogilvy feel he was succeeding by his failures and weakly being ridiculous instead of sublime. Doubtless he struggled—indeed, we can see he fought desperately—but his pen was bewitched. He wanted to enter the Woods of Westermain, and they only winked at him. He began the *Auld Licht Idylls* earnestly and they ended lighter than levity; *The Window in Thrums* became a casement opening

on Elfland. He began a serious novel and wound it up with a wild absurdity—his hero strangling himself by climbing a wall in a new overcoat. "When it is true it is dull," said Mr. Bennett of *Tommy and Grizel*; and "*A Window in Thrums* is one long oscillation between making a certain class of people ridiculous by reason of their manners, and making them dignified by reason of their extraordinary trials and fortitudes." But Mr. Bennett did not see the real cause of this oscillation or of that uncharacteristic tedium of the true parts. It is caused by the passionate efforts of the suppressed Lowland longing for sweetness and fun and deliciousness to combat the solemn Lowland ambitiousness; and the only conceivable treaty between the two was the one finally established—the agreement that he must take his toys into fairyland and play his pranks there, parting with the title of novelist: a sad little exile from seriousness, compelled to abandon the hopes he held most dear—

*What shall I do to be for ever known*
*And make the age to come my own?*

Or so it seemed for a little—and then the Fates, too, warmed towards him. He was given exactly what he asked for—in the way he least expected "the age to come" was, literally, made his own. When he crept into Kensington Gardens to make friends with the fairies he may well have felt he was resigning his great raid; as it turns out he was actually assuming the captaincy of a multitudinous army, the appointed conquerors and overrunners of the world. For there is hardly a child in the whole of England who doesn't now hold his name in the same sort of mystical reverence that he once held the poets'. He rides into the Future, that is to say, this repatriated exile, at the head of a solid generation. To pop up into London through

the trap of the Round Pond might seem a very humble and sidelong sort of entrance, but it took him into the very heart of humanity, into the midst of the massed ranks of To-morrow; he made a raid on Posterity and caught it when young, and he will probably remain its accepted leader for life. The fairies had proved their friendship in the most magnanimous way—they had granted him his earthly wish—they gave him a share of their own immortality. For there is no "ever" in the Never-Never Land, and a good fairy-tale cannot die; it is absolutely the only kind of tale, indeed, that never "dates." To scan his life now, with its involuntary victories, its two motives, one grave and mortal, one childish, enchanted, is to be reminded irresistibly of the famous scene which sealed its best triumph—the great double-tiered scene in *Peter Pan*. Up above is the solid world with its grave forest aisles, down below the unsuspected land of magic; Barrie enters, bent on wood-cutting, solemnly determined to excel, a good Gladstonian of letters. But the moment his axe cuts a notch he is seized by the resemblance to a letter-box, he has to try and post himself through the slot; and so is duly delivered, half shamefacedly, into the kingdom of make-believe, his important task neglected overhead. And here it turns out, after all, that he had really got among the roots of things, that one way to climb is to descend. When the Woods of Westermain winked at him it was really a sign of special friendliness. When he seemed to be only climbing nursery stairs he was really scaling his colossal granite steps.

And the whole elvish history has now been perfectly rounded off by the final fact of his official biography. In *Margaret Ogilvy* he told us how he and his mother borrowed the *Arabian Nights* from the Thrums village library, "but on discovering that they were nights when we had paid for knights we

sent that volume packing." And now he is a knight himself! There are some who affect to find an incongruity in the honour; we of the old school can never do that. To us it seems to have an almost incredible aptness—it is a title that perfectly fits the quaint tale of his life. It has a fairy-tale quality, and that is just as it should be, for he literally owes it to his love for the wee folk. It seems to form yet another illustration of the unintended text which these successive papers seem to be involuntarily repeating—another instance of the great truth that you must be humble if you would prevail, innocent in order to grow wise; and that, in the arts especially, a man must lose himself to find his way, resign ambition to succeed, and turn his back on the world if he would see and serve it aright.

*The Bookman*, 1913.

# HENRY JAMES

## I

First of all, I must take down that title. It makes a banner altogether too bold. A book might maintain it—a fat, four-square book; but a bit of an article built in a corner out of a wretched dole of three-thousand-odd words must never attempt to uphold it, must never pretend it can say anything adequate about the work of the man who is certainly the greatest of all living artists (yes, painters and poets swept in)—at once the most profuse and precise, the most affluent and exquisite—the completed mass[1] of whose creative work hangs before us now like the cloud of a cathedral—actually equipped, too, in the shape of the new prolonged passages of exterior comment and self-criticism, with its cathedral-like approaches, ambulatories, cloisters, where the arriving reader may positively pace to and fro with the writer—the late visitor with the old master-mason—raising his eyes reverently to the finished achievement of which the latter lingeringly, wonderfully, talks. Why, to make a mere ground-plan of these outer courts alone—a hem as elaborate as lace—would take far more than one's three-thousand dull dots. All they

[1] The reference here is to the *First Collected Edition of the Novels and Tales of Henry James*—Vols. I–XXIV, 8s. 6d. net each (Macmillan & Co., Ltd.)—and to the new, long, ruminative Prefaces with which these volumes are enriched.

can offer, poor things, is to patter down some single aisle—praying, as they meekly trot, that it may lead towards the centre, perhaps even (as the critics in *The Figure in the Carpet* hoped) to the very axis of the whole. For "*there's a particular thing in my work that I've written my books most for. It's the thing that nobody has ever perceived or mentioned, and yet it's the very heart of the whole.*" So declared (in that fable of *The Figure*) the much misunderstood master, Vereker the novelist, "awfully clever, awfully deep," whose own twenty books smiled enigmatically down on the agitated brows of their adorers.

"It hangs there as concrete as a bird in a cage, as a bait on a hook, as a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's the idea without which I wouldn't have given a straw for the whole job. It's the finest, fullest intention of the lot, and the application of it has been a triumph of patience, of ingenuity. I ought to leave that to somebody else to say; but that nobody else does say it is precisely what we're talking about. It stretches from book to book, and everything else plays comparatively over the surface of it. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it."

And "so," he adds, "it's naturally the thing for the critic to look for. It strikes me even as the thing for the critic to find." The hapless critic addressed (baffled being), though he peers and probes patiently enough, never *does* find it: that is the tragedy and the tale. But we, coming later, may be luckier. For there is now no manner of doubt whose those volumes really were. In the cloister Mr. James has confessed it. "If ever I was aware of ground and matter for a significant fable," he says dryly (in his preface to vol. xv), "I was aware of it here." The words send a thrill through the approaching three-thousand. They have only to discover "the bird in the cage, the bait on the hook"—and their little job is done. Sesame is only three syllables. They might surely

manage to write that between them. The hobbling old verger who couldn't conceivably sketch you the smallest scrap of his cathedral can still manage to carry its key.

And verily—loitering for a last time between aisle and ambulatory, straying anew through these charged, beloved books—something (it seemed to me) did suddenly sing out, and go ringing and winging from entrance to altar, up to clerestory from choir, leaving in its wake a string of lasting echoes, like a bird kindling tiny points of flame. It sounds absurd —but that was the sensation. There in an instant the essential design flashed up simplified—a lucid pattern piercing all the traceries—as plain as the plan of a house. And it kindled the place doubly: it gave it the queerest air of home. For this common chord and impulse, running through everything, was nothing less than a happy humility:—it was of Mr. James's simplicity — of his innocence, eagerness, honesty—of his monkish love (above all) for things lowly and neglected, that the bright responses spoke as they sprang. It might not be his "finest, fullest intention"—but it was full enough, and immensely it was fine;—and it *did* "govern every line" as Vereker vowed it would—it *had* "chosen every comma, every word." The staggering thing was one's failure to perceive it long before—that, and one's perception that still, outside the walls, all such talk of *reverence, innocence, eagerness* would seem the mere self-conscious capers of cheap cleverness. "Henry James simple?" —it sounds such a two-a-penny paradox. "Henry James humble?"—worse and worse. Recondite— fastidious — super-subtle — exquisite — "awfully clever and awfully deep"—these are so clearly the qualities reflected in all the mirrors that hold his reputation: qualities pointed to complacently by the superior, gruffly resented by the gross. How came this dis-

tortion? Was it humanly possible? What could make so many mirrors twist the truth?

Well, I seemed to see that too; and it was the queerest sight of all. Just a little bit, of course, it was the result of our way of lazily relying on reflectors instead of staring straight and hard at the roof—exactly like the fatigued souls you see in the Sistine thankfully accepting little looking-glasses from the guides, into which you can certainly look as you loll, but which make Michelangelo's right left and his left right. But there was something far profounder than this. The mad tergiversation was mainly the tragic result—tragic because quite inevitable—of a wild piece of interior treachery—a trick played on Mr. James by his medium. It was caused by a process which perverted its own avowed aims—a process which made Simplicity seek the side of her arch-enemy, and "the Dove" appear a very serpent, and a fresh-hearted adoration for the common home-spun of life seem a philandering with gold-leaf and luxury. It was a supreme example of technical mutiny: it is the most thrilling case of the kind in recent letters. And—I want my three-thousand to trace its twists. Set out in full, scene by scene, it would make a wonderful tale: a perfect sequel, in art, to that *Figure in the Carpet* of which it is, in life, the precursor. But a rough scenario may have virtue. It is not, after all, for its own effectiveness that one tells the tale—it is for the effect it has on tales already told. It burnishes *The Golden Bowl*, lends new wonder to *The Wings of the Dove*. Lacking this clue you may indeed drink deep enjoyment—delighting in the colour and the spaciousness and the bursts of music, the remote clear groups and shining celebrants—but it is a pleasure as incomplete as our poor Protestant delight in the great churches of the Continent. You miss the scheme and the scale—the *rationale* of the

ritual—you miss above all the eager care for humanity, the desire to render intimate aid. To see these things you must realize that it was a sweet affection for the earth that sent the whole edifice soaring and that all this pomp and splendour is at heart a protest against pride.

So that it is with no idea of being just frightfully original and all that—it is simply out of a decent desire to be useful—that one now hauls down that heading—gives it an added humility—and runs it up again as

"The Humility of Henry James."

Now the cleanest way of catching up this Ariadne-clue is to turn at once to the very earliest of his tales —the earliest, at all events, of those that find a place in the finished scheme of his Works. It is forty years, all but, since *A Passionate Pilgrim* first appeared —it is more than forty since it was written — and yet so clearly had Mr. James already perceived his true task, so firmly has he held to his course, that the story still stands as the perfect porch to his work —an epitome as well as a prelude. Its title is the best brief definition of Mr. James the artist. *A Passionate Pilgrim* is just the name one would choose for that other fine story, of which these twenty-four books are single chapters, and in which Mr. James plays the part of chief character.

The tale itself will be widely remembered: with its bright objective charm, and its purple velvet "curtain," it has always been one of the pieces that even rugged anti-Jacobites have been able to allow themselves, without loss of caste, to enjoy. Poor Clement Searle, a toil-weary American, comes, fine and faded, at the close of his life, to the England he has dreamed of all his days; and surveys it with the famished

delight of an heir coming home after exile. He has nothing but his "nice tastes, fine sympathies and sentiments"; apart from that he "doesn't pay five cents in the dollar"; but he offers his sharpened senses, made the more sensitive by fasting, to all the great traditional features of the consolatory Anglo-Saxon scene. He prowls about London—visits Hampton Court—wanders deep into the shires—seeks lastly the supreme sacredness of Oxford: the "action" of the tale—its love-affair and phantom—is scarcely more than a piece of delicate clockwork to keep his impressions softly circling, a cycle of familiar English hours; and the episodes that ring, with gradually deepening note, are but the due chimes, silvery or golden, to point and punctuate their passing.

*The country-side, in the full warm rains of the last of April, had burst into sudden perfect spring. The dark walls of the hedgerows had turned into blooming screens, the sodden verdure of lawn and meadow been washed over with a lighter brush. We went forth without loss of time for a long walk on the great grassy hills, smooth arrested central billows of some primitive upheaval, from the summit of which you find half England unrolled at your feet. A dozen broad counties, within the scope of your vision, commingle their green exhalations. Closely beneath us lay the dark rich hedgy flats and the copse-chequered slopes, white with the blossom of apples. At widely opposite points of the expanse two great towers of cathedrals rose sharply out of a reddish blur of habitation, taking the mild English light.*

Again:—

*Passing through the small oblique streets in which the long, grey, battered public face of the colleges seems to watch jealously for sounds that may break upon the stillness of study, you feel it the most dignified and most educated of cities. . . . Directly after our arrival my friend and I wandered forth in the luminous early dusk. We reached the bridge that underspans the walls of Magdalen and saw the eight-spired tower, delicately fluted and embossed, rise in temperate beauty—the perfect prose of Gothic —wooing the eyes to the sky that was slowly drained of day.*

Once more:—

*The sky never was empty and never idle; the clouds were continually at play for our benefit. Over against us, from our station on the hills, we saw them piled and dissolved, condensed and shifted, blotting the blue with sullen rain-spots, stretching, breeze-fretted, into dappled fields of grey, bursting into an explosion of light or melting into a drizzle of silver.*

And the task performed by the tale is indeed that of a dial—a *memento*—not *mori*—but of life; a delicate admonitor reminding us of our myriad overlooked opportunities. Watching Searle fingering with such passionate envy all the old objects—from the very carpets on the floors of our inns ("*into which the waiter in his lonely revolutions had trodden so many massive sootflakes and drops of overflowing beer that the glowing looms of Smyrna would have failed to know them*") to our silver ceilings of "breeze-fretted" sky, we waken to a sudden consciousness of the wonderful wealth of our home. We realize our amazing good luck. The book is an exquisite inventory—a catalogue, especially, of the things we have seen so often that we had forgotten they were there. Poor Searle never came into his kingdom—but he made us his heirs none the less. Worn out by the very passion that made him so perceptive, he dies, a little crazed, unadmitted. But he had done his job very beautifully. He endured the toil of the pilgrimage. We get the grail.

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Not an "i" need be dotted nor an angle adjusted to make that the perfect symbol of what followed. It announces Mr. James's task—it exactly illustrates the special method he invented—it even physically foreshadows the uncanny danger that was to haunt and chill it like a ghost. The range shifts, the focus

alters: the landscapes become landscapes with figures —the figures turn into portraits: in *The Portrait of a Lady* Europe has become a kind of tapestry, hanging behind the figure of Isabel like the map in that portrait of Vermeer's. But the effect of this adjustment was but to bring the eye the closer to the little universals, the things of daily life: the lineaments of desire and distress, the homely gestures of joy—an even triter stuff than fields and clouds. And for the purpose of noting these qualities, reminding us of their romance, there were always called in characters who were kinsfolk of Searle—as full of "fine tastes" and eager senses—people of *The Finer Grain—The Better Sort.* And finally, for the privilege of rendering this service to the reader, they all had to pay a price as dreadful as that exacted from poor Searle: they have all paid for it with health or with life or with the joys of success, with one or other of life's normal satisfactions. Doomed to sterility, invariably frustrate, they may seem to us like a new Order of abnegants, undergoing strange penances, suffering for the sake of the world.

Recall them to your memory. Let them troop past in turn. Roderick Hudson—Daisy Miller, the youngest and the blithest, yet both paying for their ardour with their lives, killed exactly by the fine force of their vitality. Isabel Archer—Isabel Osmond, supreme in the pale sisterhood, her tragedy in the altered name: giving joy and taking sorrow, turned to marble resignation and mute grief by the refracted beams of her own first radiance. Ralph Touchett—Madame Merle, Madame de Cintré, doubly a renunciant, and Newman, refusing even his revenge. Little Hyacinth Robinson, rarest of suicides, slain by the echo of his own ideal, by the fall of the arrow he had let fly at the stars: near to Narcissus in more

than name. Stuart Straith and Mrs. Harvey, Marcher and May Bartram, Neil Paraday, Dencombe, Morris Gedge—all the foiled multiplied people of *The Better Sort*—eager artists and authors, too fine for their places, used and then left, their wings bruised by the rough shoulders of the world. The crushed watcher in *The Cage*—the crushed teacher in *The Pupil*—the ebbing wraith of the pupil himself. The four figures in *The Golden Bowl*—suffering and frustrate in exact proportion to their fineness. And then, last and loveliest, in *The Wings of the Dove*,[1] Milly Theale, with her deep malady, the perfect type of all these *condamnés*—panting for life because she must die, draining as much of its essence as she may with lips as feverish as poor Searle's. "*Tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis*," they do indeed seize their chance of "expanding that

[1] Mr. James's own comment upon Milly Theale is well worth quoting here—if only for the sake of its curious resemblance to that famous "pulsation" passage of Pater's. "*The Wings of the Dove*," he says in his Preface to that book, "represents to my memory a very old motive; I can scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests was not vividly present to me. The idea, reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, *condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world; aware, moreover, of the condemnation, and passionately desiring to 'put in' before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible.*" The reader's memory may also be invited to travel back, for the sake of noting an exactly equivalent case, to the first book of *The Portrait of a Lady*, written thirty years before, where Ralph Touchett's sense for life, his capacity for serving us as cicerone, is made perfect by the same dire process. "He said to himself that his hour was in sight, and that it behoved him to keep his eyes upon it, but that it was also open to him to spend the interval as agreeably as might be consistent with such preoccupation. With the prospect of losing them, the simple use of his faculties became an exquisite pleasure; it seemed to him that the delights of observation had never been suspected."

interval, of getting as many pulsations as possible into the time." That is exactly why they are condemned. Those pulsations are our pleasure. They give their lives indeed: they give them to us. They die that we may live more completely.

Of the magnificence of the gift, of the beauty it has brought us, I mean to speak in a moment. But what must be pointed out first—it is the next length in our skein—is the absolute inevitability of this martyrdom, this strange sacrificial etiolation. And by that I do not merely mean that Mr. James is himself one of "the finer grain," and that his characters are the moons that reflect his own characteristic perceptions back upon us; or that his deepest instincts (always sternly Puritan) see the world as a place where the fine souls always suffer. It is something much more concrete and technical than that, and at the same time immensely more bizarre. For this fantastic fate was the result of three things—all of them aiming at the very contrary: (1) of Mr. James's respect for normality; (2) of his respect for his reader; (3) of his deep delight in the little joys of the world, in the free treasures that strew it without number. By one of the prettiest, wickedest tricks Art ever played on a priest of hers, the very prayers that implored simplicity and sanity became the agents that invoked strangeness and fear and the flitting of questionable shapes.

The way of it was this.

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"*The novel is history. That is the only general description we may give to it.*" "*The air of reality* (*solidity of specification*) *seems to me to be the supreme virtue of the novel—the merit on which all its other merits helplessly and submissively depend.*" "*The only reason for the novel's existence is that it does attempt to repre-*

*sent life.*" "*The supreme faculty of the novelist is a capacity for receiving straight impressions.*" He must strive to be "*one of those people upon whom nothing is lost.*"

These are Mr. James's first principles, his Credo and credentials. He announced them thirty years ago. (They appear in an essay called *The Art of Fiction*—at once his profession of faith and of his faith in his profession—which he wrote as a protest against Besant's bourgeois views of it—and which drew, in its turn, *A Humble Remonstrance* from young Stevenson—an elegant request for gore.) They are his first principles, and his last. The new Prefaces repeat and expand them. Now watch where they logically lead. The novel is history. It is not a mere game of make-believe. From any hint of fictitiousness, accordingly, any touch that might shake the reader's confidence, the story must scrupulously refrain. There must be no Thackerayan asides (for instance), nor any of those genial betrayals of which Trollope was so fond, in which the artist owns up that the whole thing is ventriloquism and the characters merely his dolls. To take the reader into your confidence in that way is to admit that you are taking him in. It is to cancel his confidence with your own. The author in person must never intrude. The characters must live their own lives, make their explanations unaided—their ability to do so indeed being the very proof of the validity of their conception. Their reality, that is to say, depends altogether on their power to realize. If their self-consciousness is weak they will tend to grow shadowy. To give them solidity, you must screw up their awareness. And thus, so far as the Jacobean stage is concerned, *this faculty for being intensely aware of their environment is their very principle of life.*

Now apply to this position those companion resolu-

tions: the resolve to respect and mirror the modesty of human nature; the resolve to reveal the treasure of the humble and bring out the romance of the familiar. Instantly, that state of keen consciousness has to be tightened up terrifically. Only uncommon eyes—the eyes of a Touchett or a Searle—can see the common things of life with any vividness: it takes the palate of an epicure to appreciate the flavour of dry bread. Set among smashes and crashes—tiger-hunts, earthquakes, pirates, and doubloons—Mr. James's characters might have managed to observe Rule I (that rule of self-awareness), and still remain pretty normal and sound: even a stockbroker could take fairly clear impression from a tomahawk. But to feel with intensity more usual things than tomahawks requires a character proportionately unusual; and in that invincible see-saw—situation down, temperament up—you get the central movement that has eternally teased the spiritual balance of Mr. James's art. It forms the capital letter of his Tale. In order to accomplish his democratic task he had to breed a race of rare aristocrats. In order to make his reader see and understand the excellence of the normal human scene he had to usher him into a recondite world of studios and salons and hushed leisure, where the faculty of observation is cultured like an orchid and every influence that might coarsen it is quelled.

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And the reader as he tiptoed in might well feel disturbed. Very strange it is, even a little terrifying, to see the subtle ways in which this hush has reacted on the inhabitants. The people who move here display the blanched signs of seclusion; almost they seem like the subjects of some ominous experiment, caged in a crystal bell, sensitized by subtle arts, refined away to the naked nerve. Regard the men. To keep their

fingers quick and fine, they are prohibited from toil: they must do nothing that will interrupt their special task of apprehension: they are all artists, writers, convalescents—consumptives (like Touchett)—dilettanti (like Gabriel Nash)—quivering creatures who are either observers by profession or else in a state of starved susceptibility. Even when virility has to be admitted, for the sake of dramatic contrast, it is always in the shape of workers whose work is done: men like Newman, Caspar Goodwood, Mr. Vervey—all compelled to qualify for admission to these salons, to justify their presence in these studios, by devoting the results of the work that made them strong to the feminine task of making themselves fine. But mainly it is a world of women. Already enfranchised, already fastidious, supremely self-aware—specialists already in the arts of observation and the subtler sorts of calculation—they offered Mr. James exactly the material he required, and their figures are the most active in his scene. Yet even they had to suffer, to be specialized still further, and the process left a poison in their blood. They are all strangely sterile. They bear no children. The very penalty that punishes too close breeding in real life has visited this imaginary race. Each of them, like Milly Theale, is "the last exquisite flower of a dying stock." They are "finished" in both senses of the word: final as well as fine.

And this effect of finality is not only physical. It is involved in the very tissues of their attitude towards life—is indeed the conditioning quality of their characters. For posterity is but a kind of postponement: the idea of a future makes procrastination proper; and the essence of Mr. James's contract with these people is that they shall extort the very utmost from the present—pack To-day to bursting with "pulsations." The hushed room in which they dwell is therefore the last

of a suite: it has no doorway leading out into new lives. One of his books is called *Terminations*, and the title would do for them all. Their last sentences are always sentences of death. As in the great, grim, devastating dramas of the ancients, the descent of the curtain at the close seems scarcely needful: there is nothing left to conceal. All has been cancelled out and settled up: only the lights remain unextinguished. In the merciless justice of these audits, in this cold refusal to allow debts to stand over and Fate to be fobbed off with promissory notes, we may perhaps discern the pressure, once more, of Mr. James's essential Puritanism—a grim New England delight in (1) a defiant honesty of book-keeping, an insistent production of all the vouchers that prove the integrity of every act and scene, and in (2) moral warnings and arraignments, reminders of the implacable accountancy of life. But it is the exquisite avidity of his creatures that gives these impulses their opportunity. It is their very joy in life that makes their days all Days of Judgment. For their acute consciousness of the present cuts through to the past behind. Their "historic sense" is keen, and it registers messages as faint as sighs. The most familiar things exhale them, sometimes dreadfully: forgotten graves, long turned to gardens, keep giving up their dead. Louisa Pallant is the living presence of her mother's buried selfishness. It is her father's blood in her veins, even more than her recoil from his hands, that carries Kate Croy into the dubious labyrinth that leads, at last (in *The Wings of the Dove*), to the strangest crime yet committed in our literature. Parental relics are the talismans in *The Tragic Muse*: the tale is the fight between Nick Dormer and their spells. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, by a refinement rarely noticed, it is the clinging touch of Osmond's daughter, who is the

living symbol of the wrong which the innocence of Isabel has to expiate, that prevents the latter from escaping from her doom. Everywhere the past thrills and populates the air. We see the stage with clairvoyant eyes. There is a constant resurrection of dead deeds.

And of more than deeds. . . . Uncannier than anything we have noted yet, I think, is the grisly phenomenon we come to now: the fact that actual apparitions, visible phantoms—not mere metaphors but horrid actual semblances of people dead and grieving—are constantly being invoked in secret in these high, bright, supercivilized Jacobean abodes, with their air of supreme polish and discretion.

> I heard the great clock in the little parlour below strike twelve, one, half-past one. Just as the vibration of this last stroke was dying on the air the door of communication with Searle's room was flung open and my companion stood on the threshold, pale as a corpse, shining like a phantom against the darkness behind him. "Look well at me!" he intensely gasped, "touch me, embrace me, well revere me! You see a man who has seen a ghost!"

That crazed cry of Searle's, heard in the very porch, echoes through them all. It is a phantom (foretold in the first chapter of the book) that summons Isabel Archer to Ralph's death-bed (in the last). The hero of *Sir Edmund Orme* is a spectre. *The Way It Came* is woefully, wonderfully haunted. An apparition baffles the actors in *The Real Thing.* In *The Turn of the Screw,* the hideous spectres of the dead Quint and his drab return to prey still further on the little children whom they had corrupted when alive. . . . It is an obsession that the surrounding urbanity has served somehow to conceal: but which that urbanity really makes the more amazing. It is a symptom as startling as that harsh cry of Searle's—and

it means the breaking of an unbearable tension. The overstrung nerves of these people—stretched to catch the faintest pulsation and to proclaim its presence in music—have broken with the scream of snapped harp-strings. It is a kind of hysteria induced by the hush. Shut in with their sensations, forced forever to watch the play of impalpable motives, they have lost the boundary between the imagined and the real; and ideas take living faces and grope dreadfully about their rooms. Almost it might seem that they, or their creator, had tampered with forbidden keys and opened the unpermitted door. . . .

But there is another and less darkling explanation. These grisly apparitors are essentially (I feel) the signs of sanity and rude health: messengers, not of death, but of life. They are the results of a kind of rebelliousness on the author's part — a protest against his own principles; a sudden splendid wicked shout and heave and unregenerate roar of pure relief. It is a case of fidgets, not of phantoms—restive muscles, not weak nerves—and it joins with many another case of covert violence in these books to prove that the boy in Mr. James is still alive. For although it is never noticed or mentioned (having been most craftily screened), the air of invincible decorum presented by these books masks a tremendous amount of thorough-going melodrama. From Daisy Miller's death to the Ververs' elaborate adultery—from little Hyacinth's suicide to "the low insurance job" in *The Dove*; in the lies of *The Liar* and the maniacal outburst of his wife; in the case of coldly furious infanticide in *The Author of Beltraffio*: wherever you turn, once your eyes are awake to it, the shaggy face of violence looks out. And I like it. I find it gentle, reassuring. It is a concession claimed by the simpler side of Mr. James: his one week-day in a year of

solid Sundays. And doubly therefore does it stand as another symptom of the quality of democratic sympathy which is the heart of his whole work. Democratic enough in itself (goodness knows), it is also exactly the backlash and consequence of the tension he created in his equally democratic desire to register honourably the little things of daily life. Too perfect a humility makes Hamlets of us all. And it is the Hamlets of the world who see ghosts. . . .

* * * * *

Time! "Ghosts" is my three-thousand-and-oddth word. And there is so much yet left to say. We have seen indeed how his very eagerness and devotion led him into remote and dubious ways. But there ought further to be shown (an oddly charming sight) the way the self-same qualities of eagerness and sympathy worked to save what they had half destroyed. That beautiful outer urbanity, which concealed their excesses so perfectly, was one of their achievements. They enabled his prose to absorb so many qualities, so many kinds of epithets and images, that it could make the most extravagant gestures as it moved and yet maintain an air of bland composure. It is the most "universal"—the most republican—prose in our literature—composed of more elements than any other, deriving from sources more varied, maintaining its health and balance by an intricate system of counterpoise and cross-fertilization. If the style is the man, as people keep on saying, then Mr. James's humility could be triumphantly proved by simply analysing a series of his sentences. Incessantly, on the one hand, they are dowering the smallest acts, facts, or features with great spreading pinions of imagery. As often, on the other, they are expressing the subtlest apprehensions in terms domestic, idiomatic, colloquial—using a sort of celestial slang. And the result of this inter-

marrying is prose of a superb strength and suppleness, a prose probably unsurpassed since Shakespeare's—and able, at its highest moments of passion, when it is aflame with a beauty greater than even that borne by most self-avowed poetry, to maintain the serene carriage of the estate to which it belongs, and deprecate any suggestion of a ceremony.

*Bookman, March* 1913.

## II

Somebody somewhere recently wrote an article called "The Humility of Henry James"—an article which strained to show the world (with the most irreverent cheeriness) that the graver of *The Golden Bowl* was but a blessed *ingénu*—that the essence of that lordly and elaborate art of his is just a sunny, a saintly simplicity, a beautiful boyish credulity and sweet zest. Well, that impudent essayist (for so the faithful must have felt him) has now, it is feared, to be forgiven—if not for the deed itself directly, then obliquely, *à rebours*, for clutching this latest James and triumphantly claiming it as his complete exculpation. For *A Small Boy and Others*[1] is Mr. James's "Præterita," a loving and lingering evocation of the very earliest scenes of his life—and, really, by reason both of the special character of those scenes (so pure and demure, so hushed, simple, and spare) and then of the accent of ravished wonder that describes them, we do become conscious, as never before, of a deep element of innocence in the character of this wise creature—a certain Blake-like rapture and glad amazement, a primitive glee, the very source of his so civilizing wisdom. Quaintly cloistral, at any rate, those early years must appear to us, charming with a sort of chubby meditativeness: the gentle clan of

[1] *A Small Boy and Others.* By Henry James (Macmillan)

the Jameses—uncles, aunts, cousins—enough to form a mimic community, seeming to dwell in the midst of the alien bustle of New England with the childlike independence of a brotherhood, "genially interested in nothing but themselves"—fairly forming a fraternity, placid, peaceful, quite unworldly, where our small boy might pace and ponder like a funny little friar, getting society without sophistication, seeing nothing of "life," yet being humanized, thinking always of the world as of an enchanted wonderland outside, beyond, and cuddling this wistfulness quite contentedly, making it a conscious key to joy. A happy "little love of horizons" was what he then chiefly cherished, he sees now: he "took the unknown always easily for the magnificent"; and the fine faith of a parent whom one cannot help thinking of as a twinkling, wise, brotherly Father Superior, found ways of providing knowledge without breaking into those stores of the unknown: there were none of those advance courses of experience which propose to prepare young palates and digestions for existence by cramming them with potted portions of it overnight. For the elder Henry James had a sunny loathing for the literal ("caring for our spiritual decency supremely more than for anything else," he could still stand, in the way of Virtue itself, only the kind that is "more or less ashamed" of its title), and educative specialization would seem to him a sort of deformity suffered for the sake of "success"—and "success" was a thing he had no use for. All he cared to produce was that condition of character which his son calls "accessibility to experience." You were only interested when you were disinterested—your very conscience ought to work unconsciously—and so our Henry James was equipped for life without plundering it, safe as a novice in his cell. The bloom was rubbed off nothing; yet the

senses were made keen—the very conditions that preserved them gave them practice; and thus at last when the day arrived and he ran out to meet reality he saw it all with unhabituated eyes, with a freshness that turned common things to marvels, and became the romantic realist we now know—our justest of observers and the most joyous of our artists, the man who has made fiction exacter than ever before, an acuter presentation of life, and at the same time ("and therefore" indeed) filled it fuller than ever before of a proud and lasting beauty, a beauty as great as that of poetic drama at its best—made it fairer in both senses of that word.

So at any rate one roughs it out, perhaps audaciously, once more—and here, indeed, in this new book is proof enough and to spare of at least that perpetuated boyishness, that capacity for an amazed adoration of the ordinary. For the events of his young years were all immensely ordinary, the meekest little matters-of-fact: just visits to uncles and visits to aunts—a walk down Broadway unaccompanied—a ride on a Newfoundland—a perusal of *The Lamplighter*—a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Yet it is with cries like *ravishing!* and *marvellous!* with *ineffable unsurpassable hour* and *infinitely rich and strange* that he now greets and gloats over this nursery bread-and-butter banquet. Something on page 133 thrills him by its "preponderant, unthinkable queerness." It is the question of Aunt Wyckoff's exact age. Something else, on page 35, a deed of "calm, cool courage," compels him to "lose" himself in admiration of "the consistency, the superiority, the sublimity" of its performer. All agog with excitement, you peer over his rapt shoulders and discover a small playfellow pronouncing Ohio O-ee-oh.

A quiet family party at his cousin Kate's is "a night

of revelations and enigmas over which I still hang fascinated"—a visit to Barnum's is a "desperate" day, "flushed to me now with the very complexion of romance"—a doorstep that goes down instead of up is a feature "profoundly rich and strange." And these thrills and raptures, mind you, are not just the old ones revivified—adroit inventions of the sympathetic dramatist placed on the lips of the dead little boy. They are contemporary cries, ringing out spontaneously as the pen pokes the old humdrum relics into view: this Small Boy, you feel (for of course Henry is our hero, let the book paternally affirm what it will), this amazing Small Boy has never grown up—indeed, in a sense, he has grown down. He has grown more densely boyish than ever—Mr. James has never been so childish as now—it can be shown mathematically that he is thrilled by these trifles precisely three (3) times as much now as he was then. Take an instance. Take a case even more ordinary than ordinarily—the case, say, of The Inconspicuous Uncle. In the old days that "dim little gentleman," "a natural platitude," had impressed his small nephew, peering up at him awestruck, as being an absolute nullity: he was impressive because he wasn't, because he was "a case of being no case at all, of not having even the interest of the grievance of not being one." Lured by this recollection our seventy-year-old recorder goes tiptoeing back towards his seventh year, tapping and peering and rummaging gorgeously, fairly given up to the boy's bliss of "exploring," till at length he hits the right corridor —finds the true spring—sees the dim, dusty panel slide softly back to disclose the very hour and the scene:—

> I am on a visit to Albert . . . but my host seems for the minute to have left me, and I am attached but to the rich

perspective in which "Uncle" comes and goes. I keep in view his little rounded back, at the base of which his arms are interlocked behind him, and I know how his bald head, yet with the hair bristling up almost in short-horn fashion at the sides, is thrust inquiringly, not to say appealingly, forward; I assist at his emergence, where the fine old mahogany doors of separation are rolled back on what used to seem to me silver wheels, into the brighter yet colder half of the scene, and attend him while he at last looks out awhile into Fourteenth Street for news of whatever may be remarkably, objectionably, or mercifully taking place there; and then I await his regular return, preparatory to a renewed advance, far from indifferent as I innocently am to his discoveries or comments. It is Cousin Helen, however, who preferentially takes them up, attaching to them the right importance, which is for the moment the very greatest that could be possibly attached to anything in the world; I for my part occupied with those marks of character in our pacing companion —his long, slightly equine countenance, his eyebrows ever elevated as in the curiosity of alarm, and the so limited play from side to side of his extremely protrusive head, as if through tightness of the "wash" neckcloths that he habitually wore, and that, wound and rewound in their successive stages, made his neck very long without making it in the least thick, and reached the climax in a proportionately very small knot tied with the neatest art. . . .

So it glimmers up and "sets," with a steady increase of clarity, as the focusing gets more and more exact —and already the original throb has been doubled by the addition of the joy of tracking down. And now comes the next "extra," layer number three. Softly and subtly, with every precaution, so as not to disturb its attitude, Mr. James now slips out of his seven-year-old body, draws back far enough to get it, as well as "Uncle," into the field of his vision —and suddenly discovers, with a cry, things unsuspected before, mute watchers and wonders that the small boy never recked of, raising omens positively too awful to be borne:—

I scarcely can have known at the time that this was as complete a little old-world figure as any that might then have been noted

far or near; yet if I didn't somehow "subtly" feel it, why am I now so convinced that I must have had familiarly before me a masterpiece of the great Daumier, say, or Henri Monnier, or any other then contemporary projector of Monsieur Prudhomme, the timorous Philistine in a world of dangers, with whom I was later to make acquaintance? I put myself the question, of scant importance though it may seem; but there is a reflection perhaps more timely than any answer to it. I catch myself in the act of seeing poor anonymous "Dear" (as Cousin Helen confined herself, her life long, to calling him) in the light of an image arrested by the French genius—and this in truth opens up vistas. I scarce know what it *doesn't* suggest for the fact of sharpness, of intensity of type; which, in fact, leads my imagination almost any dance, making me ask myself quite most of all whether a person so marked by it mustn't really have been a highly finished figure. It comes over me therefore that he testified—and perhaps quite beautifully; I remember his voice and his speech, which were not those of that New York at all, and with the echo, faint as it is, arrives the wonder of where he could possibly have picked such things up. To brood on this the least bit is verily to open up vistas—out of the depths of one of which fairly glimmers the queerest of questions. Mayn't we have been, the rest of us, all wrong, and the dim little gentleman the only one among us who was right? May not his truth to type have been a matter that, as mostly typeless ourselves, we neither perceived nor appreciated? —so that if, as is conceivable, he felt and measured the situation and simply chose to be bland and quiet and keep his sense to himself, he was a hero without the laurel as well as a martyr without the crown? The light of which possibility is, however, too fierce—I turn it off—I tear myself from the view. . . .

You see? First of all the happiness of hide-and-seek, of fumbling for the long-lost negative. Then the pleasure of developing it, of feeling (as he says himself—and note the plash of the nursery in the image) "the stored secretions flow as I squeeze the sponge of memory." And finally the excitement of seeing, as the plate clears in the bath, evidence the small photographer never noticed—evidence so gloriously grisly in this case that he has to destroy it with a crash—exactly like the horror-stricken doctor who breaks the camera in Kipling's "End of the

Passage." And the whole book is like that. It is triple extract of boy. On every page those three layers of zest mingle—scrumptiously composite, as luscious to bite through as Ferishtah's delectable ortolans.

And that solid, sensuous lusciousness is really all the answer that is needed to the possible whisper of "hallucination"—to those who would suggest that novices get nerves, that all this receptiveness is really self-deceptiveness, and that when Mr. James feels he is taking in so mighty much he is really being only taken in. There is a lot in the argument: susceptibility must be paid for; that early seclusion must have tended to produce a condition specially prone to fancies and fevers; and the supreme danger that haunts all Mr. James's art, as we know, is—not a too great paleness, an over-fineness, as is sometimes said—but a certain violence and extravagance, a sort of luridity, a way of seeing horrors and splendours in innocent places and of imputing the wildest motives to meek human nature (think of the *Turn of the Screw*, remember the unspeakable crime in *The Wings of the Dove*)—and it seems pretty certain that this is partly the result of that early credulity, of that awe-struck "love of horizons," and of the ingrained habit of making the most and believing the best (which is often the worst) of everything. (A credulity fostered, by the way, by another element in that early innocence—the special form in which the Small Boy first received æsthetic stimulus—a form that must seem to us now to betoken a kind of blissful infantility all round. For it was the hour of the Keans and the Keenes, of the Booths with their booths, of dioramas and melodramas and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Dickens according to Cruikshank and "Phiz"—and to feed a small monk on these things might well give him inflamed ideas about life

—a diet of pure Phiz, taken solitary, is simply an invitation to delirium tremens. Extraordinarily interesting it would be to work this influence out with thoroughness, using the theatre memories in this book as a base—discovering that Milly Theale had an ancestress in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and that Daisy Miller once lived in *Melbourne House.*) But recognition of that credulity ought not to make us incredulous. To allow that would exactly be to refuse to receive the benefits bought for us by his sacrifice. True for him or not, it is all solid truth for us. That "dim little gentleman" may actually have been neither a martyr nor hero, but for us he is certainly both; the water is wine when we get it. There are pages of supreme prose in this book—passages that will come to be regarded as some of the permanent blessings of letters, incomparable exhibitions of technical counterpoint as well as superb testimonies to the romance and the radiance of life; and it is significant that the best of these, such as the prolonged Dream-fugue (pages 360–4), occur when credulity is frankest and hallucination itself hovers unashamed. There is no space here now to quote much, but two brief examples may be given. Each takes up a theme that is quite threadbare and domestic (a children's party in one case, a walk round some shops in the other), but each dwells on it so wonderingly, distils its essence so sweetly, that in a moment it has become a *motif* idyllic, triumphant, leading the melody into wide enchantments and strange chords. Here are the first and last bars of each:—

They were numerous, the members of this family; they were beautiful; they partook of their meals, or were at that moment partaking of one, out of doors. . . . But the romance of the hour was particularly in the fact that the children, my entertainers, riveted my gaze to stockingless and shoeless legs and feet, conveying somehow that they were not poor and destitute

but rich and provided—just as I took their garden-feast for overflowing food—and that their state as of children of nature was a refinement of freedom and grace. *They were to become great and beautiful, the household of that glimmering vision; they were to figure historically, heroically, and serve great public ends, but always, to my remembering eyes and fond fancy, they were to move through life as with the bare white feet of that original. . . . I preferred fairness and wildness.* This is rank embroidery, but the old surface insists itself on spreading—it waits at least with an air of its own.

. . . . . .

But what comes back to me as the very note and fragrance of the New York cousinship in this general connection is a time that I remember to have glanced at on a page distinct from these, when the particular cousins I now speak of had conceived, under the influence of I know not what unextinguished morning star, the liveliest taste for the earliest possible rambles and researches, in which they were so good as to allow me, when I was otherwise allowed, to participate; health-giving walks, of an extraordinary matinal character, which made us all feel together, under the conduct of Honorine, bright child of the pavement herself, as if we, in our fresh curiosity and admiration, had also something to say to the great show presently to be opened, and were free throughout the place, as those are free of a house who know its aspects of attic and cellar or how it looks from behind. . . . *Of a wondrous mixed sweetness and sharpness and queerness of uneffaced reminiscence is all that aspect of the cousins and the rambles and the overlapping nights melting along the odorously bedamped and retouched streets and arcades; bright in the ineffable morning light, above all, of our peculiar young culture and candour.*

"Bright in the ineffable morning light, above all, of our peculiar young culture and candour." It slides and loops in a perfect cadenza. What does it matter though it does tend to "embroidery," though it isn't true to the particular piece of life? It's true of life in the lump—that's the very lilt of it, and that "wondrous mixed sweetness and sharpness and queerness" is the very colour that gleams in its web. It convinces us of that, and in our conviction we find it so; we are at once involved in high adventures of our own. "For myself,

I always left him in a state of intimate excitement, with a feeling that all sorts of valuable things had been suggested to me; the condition in which a man swings his cane as he walks, leaps lightly over gutters, and then stops, for no reason at all, to look, with an air of being struck, into a shop window where he sees nothing." It is not in this book, indeed, that Mr. James says that—it is in an old essay of his upon Turgenieff—but the quotation has a double right to creep in here. For it is both another illustration of his charmed childishness and a perfect definition of its results; we, too, may feel that "intimate excitement," as though we had been supping essential wisdom. And if, to receive that sense, as well as to render it, you have also to become as one of these little ones—well, there are worse ways of inducing Life to admit you to her treasures than by making it plain that you don't in the least mind being taken in?

*Manchester Guardian, May* 1913.

## III

Dare to be a Canute! Will nobody take arms against this sea—this tide—of yeasty gush that has come swilling up the beaches, among the legs of us readers, simply because another volume of Mr. James's reminiscences has dropped anchor in Critical Bay?[1] Of course the book is beautiful, and tremendously beautiful, in its spacious, handsome, high-pooped, gold-scrolled way; but it really ought to be recognized that much of the beauty which has set criticism lapping like this belongs by right to the passengers aboard her, to the real-life cargo which she carries—to Henry James, sen., and the late William James and the shining baggage of their brave and brilliant lives and letters;

[1] *Notes of a Son and Brother.* By Henry James (Macmillan).

and that the book's own intrinsic beauty, its towering poop and curving quarters, often actually injures instead of enhancing the effect of that fortunate freight. The book, in fact, is a heavy sailer—that high poop checks its way. And since its avowed purpose, as plainly specified in the charter-party pasted on its prow (by which one only means the title on the cover), is to provide—not a triumphant exhibition of high poopery, but a safe passage home to the reader's consciousness and memory for the two noble personalities it names, then it is surely perfectly evident that if the event be judged honestly in the light of its own aims and terms we have no option but to write it down a partial failure. We will not go quite that length here—for reasons to be mentioned in a moment. But we really must distinguish sternly between the vessel and the voyagers, refuse to credit the former with the latter's charms; we must draw that elementary distinction between content and form, between the interest of the subject and the arts of the narrator, which we would never dream of observing in the case of Mr. James's (or any other artist's) novels. For we are dealing here with biography — and biography is history — and history serves as a science : it is only in the arts that manner and matter are one flesh.

And actually it isn't at all a mortifying sternness; to be frank, it immensely multiplies our gains. For to discriminate in this way between cargo and hull is to discover the presence of an extraordinary bit of contraband—a lurking Jonah, no less, concealed in the cellarage, the unsuspected cause of all the perils and delays—but who turns out, when once extricated, to be capable of revelations and prophecies which instantly make him, for us, far more permanently precious than even the delayed dignitaries on deck. For this stowaway is simply Mr. James's private genie —the powerful dæmon upon whose aid his imagination

is dependent, without whose support the novels would never have been written; and to lay hands on it is therefore not only to learn how to allow for the bias of this particular book—it is also to become possessed of the perfect guide and interpreter to all the kingdoms of Mr. James's art. For what makes this book sag and yaw so, dipping so deeply that it often obscures what it conveys? Simply the constant play and presence of a spirit of noble credulity, the overpowering influence of a prodigious faculty for wonder. There is no doubt about this. The tiniest scrap of reality—be it letter, episode, or mild scene—has no sooner been laid on the page than the pen of the Master, pursuing a habit by now deeply ingrained, begins to enrich it adoringly, to weave attributions, to dower it with imputations that fondly deepen and spread, until at length the first quiet fact, the actual historical picture, is as undecipherably overlaid as though it had been but a sketch on a canvas meant for embroidery. In fiction, of course, the bare fact *is* just such a sketch—the real subject is the ultimate blossoming wonder; but in biography it is the original item, not the last flowered result, that forms the true stuff of the tale—it is for facts, not interpretations, that we turn greedily to history; we like to do the transforming ourselves. It was only the other day that Mr. James, very courteously, was complaining that his juniors seemed to have ceased to "select," but it is actually in his own work that one has often of late felt the pressure of that kind of confusion most bewilderingly. Serenely confident by now of the power of imagination and faith to discover infinity behind the smallest fact, he has come almost to ignore the mere surface fluctuations and to rank all things as equally worthy of "treatment." Any subject serves his purpose, yields him endless beauty, and so face values and distinctions cease to rule him. With the result that we look on

the world as through a magnifying glass, darkly. It is the method of a superb optimism, but perhaps of a fatalistic optimism, a little too catholic and indiscriminate; it is magnificent, but we miss the scale of life.

Not that Mr. James doesn't know of his proclivity. Looking back here at his boyhood he does indeed identify it affectionately, and notes, too, how its development was fostered, almost feverishly, by the confrontation of his own beautiful Balzacized belief in romance with the exceptional rawness of the reality around him. "Few of the forces about us," he says (speaking of their life in gawky New England), "reached as yet the level of representation," and consequently "our care was to foster every symptom and breathe encouragement to every success, or, in other words, *to read devoutly into everything, and as straight as possible, the very fullest meaning it might learn to have.*"

> I have to reckon here [he allows again] with the trick of what I used irrepressibly to read into things; it seemed so prescribed to me, so imposed on me, to read more, as through some ever-felt claim for roundness of aspect and intensity of effect in presented matters, whatever they might be, than the conscience of the particular affair itself was perhaps developed enough to ask of it.

But though he can thus recognize, and propose to allow for, the influence on his early memories of this devoted instinct for enlargement, he cannot humanly "reckon with" the play of the same impulse now—an impulse so strengthened and elaborated by a lifetime's encouragement that it is certain to magnify not only those early magnifications, but also the very act of magnifying. We ought to give an example. It is hardly possible to submit a perfect one—the very nature of the quality to be exhibited forbids it: for a really first-rate specimen would overflow the

banks of this column and fairly flood the entire surrounding page. But the paragraph which follows may serve. Mr. James, when a schoolboy, returning to America from Europe, took a look at Paris from his *pension* bedroom window, and this is how he recollects that morning mood:—

. . . The "old-world" hours were numbered too dreadfully—had shrunk but to a handful: I had waked up to that, as with a passionate even if private need for gathering in and saving, on the morrow of our reaching our final sticking-place: I had slipped from my so cushioned sleep, my canopied couch, to hang, from the balcony of our quatrième, my brothers' and mine, over that Place du Palais Royal and up against that sculptured and storied façade of the new Louvre, which seemed to me then to represent, in its strength, the capacity and chiselled rim of some such potent vivifying cup as it might have been given us, under a happier arrangement, to taste now in its fullness and with a braver sense for it. Over against us on the great Palace wall, as I make out—if not for that occasion then for some other—were statues of heroes, Napoleon's young generals, Hoche, Marceau, Desaix, or whoever, such a galaxy as never was or should be again for splendid monumental reference; and what it somehow came to was that here massed itself the shining Second Empire, over which they stood straight aloft and on guard, like archangels of the sword, and that the whole thing was a high-pitched wonder and splendour, which we had already, in our small, gaping way, got into a sort of relation with, and which would have ever so much more, ever so thrillingly, to give us. What it would give us loomed but vaguely enough out of the great hum and the great toned perspective, and with all the great noble expanse, of which we had constant reminder; but that we were present at something it would be always after a privilege to have been concerned with, and that we were perversely and inconsiderately dropping out of it, and for a reason, so far as there might be a reason, that was scarcely less strange—all this loomed large to me as our interval shrank, and I even ask myself before the memory of it whether I was ever again in the later and more encompassing and accommodating years to have in those places so rich a weight of consciousness to carry or so grand a presumption of joy. The presumption so boldly entertained was, if you please, of what the whole thing meant. It meant, immensely, the glittering *régime*, and that

meant in turn, prodigiously, something that would probably never be meant quite to any such tune again ; so much one positively and however absurdly said to oneself as one stood up on the high balcony, to the great insolence of the Louvre and to all the history, all the glory again, and all the imposed applause, not to say worship, and not to speak of the implied inferiority, on the part of everything else that it represented.

Now, how are you going to take that? As a wonderful effort of memory, *cum* a marvellously impressionable small boy? Or as an illustration of a great artist's power of "reading in" once he is given a fragment of real life to focus on? It is not difficult to choose. We do not even need to say it isn't veracious—what we say, indeed, on the contrary, is that we have here a revelation of the essential verity of the episode seen imaginatively "in the light of eternity." It is not "true to life"—but it is exactly true to Life; the thrill it yields is adequate to the wonder of existence. And all that it elicits did lie dormant in the scene; it is realism of the most absolute kind. It only becomes fallacious, it is only unreliable, if we read the book as biography.

But the second you perceive its fallibility as autobiography, how extraordinarily complete a confession it becomes! Just because it swings aside from the course of strict self-description, it carries the writer straight into our hands; its bias is the key to his character. For its quality of faithlessness makes it a confession of one supreme faith—and that is the best faith of all—namely, good faith. It has been by the exercise of this instinct for adoringly "reading in," for believing the best of things, making the most of things, with a gallant credulity, that he has accomplished his amazing feats in fiction; so that we now see that the whole golden series, and especially the last lofty group, are a succession of avowals of a belief in life's power to vindicate any trust and jus-

tify the most generous illusions. Nay—they become something even more exhilarating. For since, of all the novels written in our tongue and day, none carries the same sense of reality, may we not say they also prove the truth of the faith they express, and visibly demonstrate life's right to this confidence? It is rather a tremendous thing, surely. The work of our greatest effective realist was achieved under the influence and glow of romance. It is a crushing answer to cynicism, pessimism, prudence; it proves the Fates to be sisters of joy. Just because he has approached life almost worshipfully, he has been admitted to its secrets; he has proved the accuracy of extravagance and the wisdom of simplicity, the common sense of chivalry and faith. Urbane as this book is, it is boundlessly trustful—it stakes its all on the pride of human nature. Its author has entered into understanding of that particular kingdom of heaven we call the earth simply because his heart has remained as confiding as a child's.

*Manchester Guardian*, 1914.

## THE ARTLESSNESS OF MR. H. G. WELLS

Mr. Wells's *Marriage* is a strange, restless, ricochetting, exhilarating book; but to feel the full glow of the adventure you must see the book itself as part of it and make its author a dramatis persona. Stamped on its flyleaf are the words *Fraternally to Arnold Bennett*, and the Masonic style of the salute may give the key to the tone of the pages that instantly follow. Not otherwise might two philosophers exchange glances over the unconscious heads of the mob they seek to serve, and these opening chapters (a good fifth of the book) are very omniscient indeed. Readers may remember a kind of manifesto Mr. Wells issued a little while ago, a Declaration of Fiction's Independence and the handsome intentions of the Novelist: "We are going to write about the whole of human life; we are going to deal with political questions, and religious questions, and social questions." Well, these pages have the air of being written from the summit of their elevating petard. They are so confoundedly superior. Produced in accordance with a lofty theory of conception, they seem, so to say, a bit eugenical: mighty clever, very precocious, and all that, but—priggish. They are written in the knuckle-rapping style. The particular question they are going to put us right about is this little matter of Marriage; they will just let us see, as brightly as possible, the kind of muddle we poor mortals have made of it. Instantly, affably, with a

negligent neatness you can't help admiring, the board is set for the display. The pieces are our "types," our puzzled pawns and podgy bishops, teachers and taught—and comical objects they look as the cool forefinger flicks and clicks them condescendingly into place. There is Mr. Pope (U)—"a coachbuilder by birth, a gentleman by education—one of that large and representative class which imparts a dignity to national commerce by inheriting big businesses from its ancestors"; and Mrs. Pope, who thinks there is a lot in Christian Science. There is Sir Thomas Petchworth (L), who has restored his parish church "in a costly and destructive manner," and Lady Petchworth, who strives to raise the level of village life through the influence of green-dyed deal and morris dances. There is Aunt Plessington, still more progressive, a lean lady with large front teeth fitted with lips that "close quietly and with a slight effort after her speeches, as if the words she spoke tasted well and left a peaceful, secure sensation in the mouth." And there is Mr. Bunford Paradise the musician, and samples of the fiercer kinds of hygienist, and the Rev. Jopling Baynes, "a clergyman of the evasive type with a quite distinguished voice." What a Race! Every surname a sneer. And in the midst of these phenomena is placed Marjorie, daughter of the Popes, outwardly a delicious English girl, cream and rose-gold, but a type at heart. For she has been educated at Oxbridge on Muffled Christianity, and is therefore a true product of our Twentieth Century Muddle, and her business is to complete the exposure of the absurd guides and guardians about her by making a thorough mess of her marriage. To this end Mr. Wells provides another piece, a Mr. Magnet, "a humorous writer," a person with a whitey-grey face, a thin neck, low silk collars, and a protuberant eye. His creator (no! his compiler, his constructor, his pro-

curer) asserts that he is a contributor to *Punch*. We are sure he was only a contribution. He is like nothing so much in the world as one of those drawings by Mr. George Morrow. And it is to this gnome that Mr. Wells blandly assures us that, things being what they are, Marjorie would inevitably become engaged, gently approved by parents and pawns! This is worse than eugenics. Horrible spectacle of a distinguished novelist forcibly mating two incompatibles in order to procure proofs of his theory of racial disease. It is monstrous, inhuman. We prefer the simple, old-fashioned methods of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. And already it is page 118.

And then the real Mr. Wells wakens up. Across this cold clicking and snubbing there suddenly thrills the rich sound we used always to hear in his books —the giant buzz and thrum of a swift aeroplane—

> It arrested Mr. Magnet in mid-jest. The monster came sliding up the sky over the trees beside the church, a great stiff shape, big buff sails stayed with glittering wire, and with two odd little wheels beneath its body. It drove up the sky, rising with a sort of upward heaving, until the croquet players could see the driver and a passenger perched behind him quite clearly. It became immense and overshadowing, and everybody stood rigid as it swept across the sun above the vicarage chimneys. . . . The huge thing banked, but not enough, and came about and slipped away until its wing was slashing into the tree-tops. It came on its edge, hesitated whether to turn over as a whole, then crumpled, and in a volley of smashing and crashing came to rest. . . .

*Deus ex machina!* Marjorie is saved, or at any rate de-Magnetized. Of the two new pieces spilt out of the sky, in this splendid, untypical, and therefore thoroughly truthful manner, one is Richard Trafford, a six-and-twenty scientist (with a Christian name at last) and a real live man. He has a brain like a lamp and a body of steel, and a heart bubbling with poetry and joy. He saves Marjorie from the threatened

stalemate by interposing. He forces her to break from her people. They marry, they honeymoon in Italy, they set up house in Chelsea. These chapters are pure gold. Released from its lofty task of destructive criticism, Mr. Wells's genius is now free to tackle its true hodman's work of positive creation. The account of the fitting up of the little London house, a cunning nest of bright colours and deft shapes, is a catalogue as delectable as a carol.

But titles are titles, and in the midst of this spontaneous exposition of how life really can be lived in these glorious modern days the superior demonstrator remembers his mission, hastily quashes the rebellious brightness. Marjorie's business is to make Trafford miserable—that is why she is here. The typical trick is employed. Trafford is tripped up by an overdrawn passbook. Her Oxbridge training acting on a mind eager for beauty makes Marjorie an extravagant housewife. In addition, she so far forgets herself as to make Trafford a father. Nothing for it, plainly, under these circumstances, for a brilliant young scientist with a brain like a lamp, with a professorship and a private income, but to take to penny-a-lining and cheap lecturing in order to keep the child in food. His research work, the priceless research work that was placing his hands on the keys of existence, must be thrown tragically aside. From which you will see what a muddle your twentieth century must be in. Q.E.D., page 280.

And then, for a second time, the genuine Wells intercedes. This time he tosses us an Oriental magician with a palace in the sky; or at any rate a Jewish financier, Sir Rupert Solomonson, with a pleasure-house in the Alps. This powerful genie (one of the best bits of portraiture in the book, by the way) offers to equip Trafford with laboratories and apparatus and funds without end if he will only consent to apply

a bit of his science and run off a recipe for making rubber synthetically. Nothing easier to a fellow like Trafford—and instantly the Chelsea house is transported to Mayfair and life burgeons afresh. Marjorie becomes an impeccable hostess, entertains brilliantly, adds lucky-starred babies Two, Three, and Four to the nursery. All these constructive chapters, once more, have an excellent strong ardour and glow. Life and colour return to them, character is no longer caricature, the quick phrases dart inimitably, delighting ear, eye, and mind with their vivid spoils. There are passages of a sustained sureness that are amongst the best Mr. Wells has ever done: the scenes at Vevey, for instance, are superb. Nor is there any reason on earth, of course, why this *réveillé* should not have continued, why Trafford, thus serenely established, should not now have returned to his researches with a new confidence and content and become a noble citizen-scientist. Except this awful altruism, the book's benevolent mission, and remembering which—"This marriage *must* be marred," mutters Mr. Wells desperately, and tries to suppress the dawn once again. More types are hastily produced, more sneers. Blenkins at the Club, "talking grey bosh with infinite thoughtfulness"; Dr. Codgers, of Cambridge, "bubbling away with his iridescent Hegelianism like a salted snail." London is represented as a quag of "ultimately aimless life, a tremendous spawning and proliferation of uneventful humanity." The sight of these things fills Trafford with a profound bitterness and disgust. He decides that his equipment weighs him down instead of helping him. With all the marvellous levers of modern life glinting neatly in front of him, he concludes that modern life is a muddled futility, poisoning him and dragging him down. He cannot research worth a cent.

Whereupon (it really is delicious!) in bursts yet again

the irrepressible harlequin, the Wells *pur sang*. The magic wand this time is nothing less than the North Pole. Reviewing the whole situation quite practically, our clear-headed scientist decides that the only thoroughly sensible way of dealing with the problems of metropolitan life is—to go and live in Labrador, And he goes, taking Marjorie with him. From White House to Log Cabin. A journey as ridiculous and as real as that living, irrelevant, cross-country scamper after "quap" which shoots off at a mad tangent out of *Tono-Bungay*. They camp in the wilderness alone, brave hardships, weather a winter. Trafford breaks his leg hunting; Marjorie tracks him and sets it, carries him back to the log-hut, nurses him (without soap), cooks for him (without candles), listens to his delirious ravings. In his fever he fronts the last problems of life, leaps to unattained heights. He surveys the world anew, and shows Marjorie the vision. "Where there is nothing there is God." Together, when the spring breaks, they return to life and London, filled with a new comprehension and radiant with certitude and hope. End.

Eminently improbable? Rather! The world does not fall into focus when surveyed from the Pole. Life in a log-hut (without soap and candles) is far more cluttered and complex than life in a well-designed palace; an intelligent house in Park Lane is the place to achieve true simplicity. Trafford's leg would certainly not have set so sweetly: it would probably have mortified horribly; and the cramped conditions and the darkness, the poor food and the smell of it, Marjorie's amateurishness and the general misery, would only have exacerbated still further the little personal resentments they are supposed to have soothed and assuaged. Granted. But do let us realize, Mr. Practical Sceptic, the true source of these discrepancies. It is the practical planning of the book

that sets it askew. Had Trafford and Marjorie gone swinging off to Labrador in sheer joy of living, looking merely for fun, then the snowfields and the tonic roughness and the astringent loneliness would have braced them up no end. It is their owlish proposal to make the trip a solemn rite, to spend a solid winter in a hut "thinking all things out afresh," that robs the results of credibility; and that pompous proposal is the result of the muddle which is the result of Mr. Wells's own proposal. It is the kind of sentimentality that so often comes in when the intelligence, like a *nouveau riche*, assumes jaunty control of things older and deeper than itself. Mr. Wells's genius is far too big to be packed into a definition—even (as this book shows) when the definition is framed by himself; but it may be suggested that his decisive gift is a vivid faculty for bold improvisation, for striking out swift generalizations and potent impromptus, and backing them up, as they spring, giving them life and validity, with images of an animal accuracy, phrases of a pouncing precision, and sudden epithets that leap like arrows to their mark. Watch him roughing out a new house, a new State, a new Time: it is like seeing a master draughtsman working with swift coloured chalks—dashing in towers with a touch, swirling out vistas, dropping details in their wake like gems. Certainly in this book it is the flashes and splashes and sudden unforeseen sallies that are reliable, that reveal; it is the deliberate calculations that go wrong. And their error is increased by the very benignance behind them. For the philanthropic purpose argues (does it not?) a lack of that proud humility which is the mark of the creator in this kind. Into the darkness, in search of enlightenment, the good novelist sends his little creatures—there to suffer and explore and fight experimentally—miraculous pioneer-projections of us watching humans behind. But the whole value of

their evidence depends on their complete reliance on the spark of life within them. The conscientiousness that ties them to the trackway of a theory is really lack of faith. To foretell their future is to falsify it, is to turn them into marionettes, jerking unhumanly. It is Trafford meekly earning guineas by lecturing because his wife has not studied Domestic Economy who is monstrous and unreal. It is the airship falling out of heaven like a miracle that observes the true modesty of nature. It is when the novelist says "I know no more than you what will happen, we are all children together" that he is on the brink of making revelations.

*Manchester Guardian*, 1912.

# THE COMMONSENSE OF MR. ARNOLD BENNETT

## I

THAT Mr. Bennett could have given us a better book than *The Card*;[1] that much of it is frankly just frivolling and more of it almost rowdily rollicking; that though it deals once again with those confounded Potteries it has nothing of the dark dignity of *Clayhanger*—these are bound to be some of the things our Cockney cousins will be printing as they solemnly decide that *The Card*, like *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and *How to Live on Twenty-four Hours a Day*, is another of the things they must try to overlook for the sake of *The Old Wives' Tale*. There is a crumb or two of reason on their side; *The Card is* a sort of skylarking, a *Merry Wives of Windsor*, bearing much the same relation to *Clayhanger* that snap does to responsible bridge or Cinquevalli's cue-play to Diggle's; but to regard it as a giddy aberration, an indiscretion, is to get a wholly wrong idea about both it and its maker. *The Card* is genuine Bennett; it flings a happy light on the whole fascinating Bennett problem; and indeed the really fundamental thing to say about it, comparatively, is not that it ought to have *Clayhanger's* qualities, but that *Clayhanger* would be better if it had some of the qualities of *The Card*. But that is a fact not easily seen in a London fog.

[1] *The Card*. By Arnold Bennett (Methuen, 1911).

The Metropolitan view-point in these matters (as every day makes plainer) is inevitably as oddly askew as London itself is on the map; the Londoner sees life, England's life, at an angle, fore-shortened, as from a stage-box; instead of taking to it gradually, breast-on, from the primitive beach, every step an adventure, he nips into it aslant, deep water at once, from the door of his sophisticated bathing-van—a solid half of experience irrecoverably missed. And thus, as a consequence, the provinces are always for him a kind of vague hinterland, protoplasmic and grey, an illimitable East End somewhere at the back of the shires; and even if he doesn't actually ask wearily, with Mr. Walkley, "What *are* the Five Towns anyway?" he does feel that the proper tone to speak of the provinces artistically is a sort of Gissing greyness, as who should talk of Soup Kitchens and the Submerged. A Pottery *Il Penseroso* he can understand, but not a Pottery *L'Allegro*. In *Clayhanger*, where spades were called spades, he thought he detected the sombreness—did indeed (positively!) praise that sanguine and romantic book for its unflinching austerity. But in *The Card*, where, though spades are still trumps, the game goes undisguisedly *allegretto*, he suspects mere unreality and loud farce. "What's he done? What great Cause has he ever been identified with?" asks a virtuous old Councillor indignantly on the last page of the book. He is speaking of Denry Machin, the Card, the man who bluffs his way to funds and favours by dint of cheek and mother-wit. It might be Mr. William Archer solemnly reproving the author. And the stout, sensible Staffordshire reply, on which the curtain comes down, "He's identified with the great cause of cheering us all up," is perhaps one that, as a defence of Mr. Bennett, only a born provincial can properly understand.

For it is probably true that to enjoy *The Card*

completely you must be lucky enough to be born a little nearer to the centre of things than London. To appreciate Mr. Bennett's art, a purely provincial product, to see all that it stands for and all that it is bringing us, you too must be a provincial—seeing London, as a consequence, a third storey, not a basement and first cause. It is the half-dazed tripper, fresh through the portals of Euston, at whom the cool Cockney smiles, who is the real connoisseur of London, the expert in its life and lore; and Mr. Bennett has never lost that primitive relish for the spectacle of Piccadilly and the Strand. Harrod's (see his *Hugo*) is as wonderful to him as the Bagdad bazaars; the Savoy (see *The Grand Babylon Hotel*) far more thrilling than the Palace of the Doges. And they are romantic (this is the great point) not because he is bedazzled by them, but because his shrewd provincial eyes are fresh and strong enough to see them in their quiddity—as elaborate engines "functioning" ingeniously, draining England so neatly of its succulent tit-bits, plucking waiters from the Alps, inhaling and expelling human bodies. Even those of his readers who would blush to be caught reading *Hugo* must have seen how assiduously he resolves things to their structural elements, beginning one book, *The Old Wives' Tale*, with a reference to parallels of latitude and another with an adjusting side-glance at the solar system. It is because life is so mechanical that he finds it so romantic. To such a man, seeing the structure from cellarage to cowls, aware (like Edwin Clayhanger) of the hot-water pipes hidden in the walls, the smallest item in a Pottery parlour fairly twinkles with picturesque possibilities —every street, every shop, presents a forest of fascinating levers—and there is no higher happiness in life than to pull this and that, learn their cute combinations, master the art of *savoir-faire*. As a result, all

his novels are practical demonstrations of that art; his characters, less or more, are virtuosi in life—learning *How to Live on Twenty-four Hours a Day.* And just as in *Clayhanger* we got Edwin fingering levers and rods rather falteringly—sometimes setting things in motion unconsciously, like the country cousin, new to hotel-tricks, who stepped into a snug waiting-room, pulled the bell-rope, and found himself shooting skywards in a lift—so, too, in *The Card* we have Denry Machin tugging and experimenting audaciously, using the actual apparatus of contemporary Potterydom to provide him with money and mansions and as many adventures and victories as were ever carved out with a sword.

It is the gayest exposition. Nothing is ever done "off" on Mr. Bennett's stage; we see exactly what Denry does and how he does it; how (for instance) fishing a scrap of chocolate out of a glass of lemonade and perceiving its precise relation to Llandudno he converts it into a cool five hundred pounds. *Toujours l'audace!* Like a madcap chaffeur, Mr. Bennett loves to rush himself and his characters into tight corners, trusting to the crush of the crisis to squeeze out the brilliant solution; and he is never floored. One would like to make a list of these escapades and blithe improvisations, and show how much their effect of reality, of eminent feasibility, is due to the driver's adroitness as well as his daring, to Mr. Bennett's cool eye for relative and ultimate values. But a point perhaps better worth making is the fact that it is the very furiosity of the fun, the element of fantasy and extravagance, that gives the last touch of truth to the tale as a picture of reality. "Every life is a series of coincidences. Nothing happens that is not rooted in coincidence"—thus the *raisonneur* in *The Card.* Now the danger that dogs Mr. Bennett's more sober achievements, built up with such Euclidean logic,

tracing causes with such exquisite clarity, is that they may fail to convey the sense of the fantastic element in life, the untamed force that pounds through the fabric so incalculably, dishevelling and exalting the neat systems. Two and two make five in real life; in *Clayhanger* perhaps they too often add neatly up to four. It is this Gothic element in things that makes such a jolly gargoyle as *The Grand Babylon Hotel* a more faithful symbol of reality than some much sterner stuff; and it is this heightened irrational strain that one wants to see swaggering through the cool symmetry of *Clayhanger* like organ-music throbbing through a church. Artists of another type (Mr. Henry James, for instance) can give us the equivalent in the form of coloured metaphors and vaulted imagery and the evocative music of words. Mr. Bennett, who has no turn for oratory and stained-glass window work, can give it us supremely well in the shape of a stalking impersonal plot. This is what one means by saying that *Clayhanger* might borrow a trick or two from *The Card*. Its author's masterpiece will be a blend of *savoir-faire* papers and shockers and *Clayhangers*—a thrifty utilization that appeals to the provincial mind. And, of course, since two-thirds of it are still unborn, that masterpiece may prove to be *Clayhanger* itself.

II

This morning sees Mr. Arnold Bennett playing Cards again;[1] and the rapid snap, whirr, and snick with which he cuts, deals, and then goes off, irrepressibly trumping trick after trick, is a process quite conspicuously unconnected with prosody. Not, indeed, that that itself isn't a circumstance possessing a certain amount of significance. In fact, to be quite fair to it,

[1] *The Regent*. By Arnold Bennett (Methuen, 1913).

it really fits like a key straight into the book's winning qualities. For the rum mental law that makes our Ruskins and Swinburnes—our supreme lovers and masters of richly orchestrated words—practically post-deaf to every other kind of music (Ruskin couldn't tell "Auld Lang Syne" from "Annie Laurie," and Swinburne was nearly as bad), seems to have a corollary which provides that men like Mr. Shaw and Mr. Bennett (rapt adorers of St. Cecilia, devotees of grand opera) shall possess, by way of set-off, the musician's bump of mathematics, and so, when they come to write, shall cling always to the logical—playing words like chessmen, never like keys—arranging them in rational rows, stripped brightly bare of all the illusive, incalculable, mysterious, magical, eminently unreasonable aids of melody and cadence. Of course, their work has its beauty, but it is architectural, not oral; it is all explicit, male, classical, never feminine or fugitive; it says all it means, despises implications, never tries to beglamour us with spells or shifting gleams; its very visions are passed on to us as observations. Mr. Bennett's circumstantial statements! And his marks of exclamation! And his geometrical progressions of conjunctions! It is the writing of a man who has discovered the romance of the reasonable, the wild excitement of watching logic track and pounce. But it is also the work of a man who likes pure music so much that he has a contempt for the bastard verbal kinds. Mr. Shaw's favourite recreation is playing a pianola. Any one could guess it from his way of holding his pen. And a performance on a pianisto is the first thing Denry Machin gives us when the curtain rises on this continuation of *The Card*. We might have known it before the curtain went up. With nothing more to go upon than Mr. Bennett's way of dealing out his sentences, both Denry and his pianisto could be predicated.

And there can be no doubt about it that it is this inevitability of Denry that explains why we are all bearing up so uncomplainingly beneath Miss Hilda Lessways' persistent non-appearance and receiving with such splendid good-humour Mr. Machin's attempts to entertain us in her stead. For Hilda's indisposition has a deep and dark reality: there is a special sense in which she is far less fully vitalized than the Card. For behind the latter is the whole vigour of his author's personality—not simply, as in her case, a dramatically diverted vein of it, fed by imaginative sympathy. Mr. Bennett's own genius is not only masculine, it is of the Card's particular kind; and the result is that the latter lives with a gusto and reality that fairly plays all the other characters off the boards. Compare his capacities with even those of Edwin Clayhanger. Edwin's distinctive gift, we are told, was a dim proclivity towards draughtsmanship. Very well: we accept it; we take the author's word; but it is merely a statement, untested—we never see any samples of his powers. But Denry's special idiosyncrasy is simply solid mother-wit—and the book does what he is praised for while we watch. There is absolutely no deception. We are not merely assured that Denry got into a hole, and that he then turned it into a gold mine. There *is* the pitfall—there goes Denry into it—and there in due course authentic nuggets appear, golden ideas and precious tips which you may pick up off the page and pocket for your own private use after the performance. Suppose you wanted to design a theatre far more sensibly and satisfactorily than any other theatre in the world, how would you set about it? What practical rules would you observe? *The Regent* fully explains. Suppose you longed to crush, impress, overwhelm, and generally reduce to a psychological jelly some complacent whipper-snapper of a bounding Metropolitan, and

suppose you had nothing to do it with but a common gas-jet, five minutes, and the contents of your pockets, how would you set about *that?* Read *The Regent*, page 55. Is it a valet you want to prove a hero to? See *The Regent*, page 81. How to Deal with Domineering Lawyers—*The Regent*, page 179. How to Deal with Dog-bite—*The Regent*, page 173. How to Cure Nettle-rash—no, that is suppressed. How to Deal with Dukes—*The Regent*, page 175. How to Lay Corner-stones in an Absolutely Unprecedented Way, How to Extricate Yourself from an Entanglement with a Radiant Actress-Heiress with the Minimum of Trouble, Tears, and Treachery, How to Cure Dyspepsia, How to Take a Theatre Call—how, in fact, to Live on Twenty-four Hours a Day and successfully Work the Human Machine—see *The Regent*, pages 1–319. And all the prescriptions are genuine. Not a single solution is faked. The methods are perfectly sound. These are not the prearranged demonstrations of your Sherlock Holmes type of hero, marvellously retracing the steps his author has just taken. Every problem comes as fresh to the writer as to the reader; its elements are all shown in advance, and then they are honestly adhered to; the success depends entirely on the Card's native shrewdness—never on the exercise of the divine right of authorship. It is a series of displays of pure, unaided commonsense.

And the reason of this genuineness is simply that Denry's great gift is actually a bit of Mr. Bennett showing through. The picture has been given verisimilitude by the excellent device of the artist fitting his own face into a hole in the canvas from behind, above the painted body. That dodge alone is pure Denry and enough to betray the identity: none but a man with more gumption than most writers are blest with would have seen how to turn his own life to such account. *The Regent* is almost a *roman à clef*, so

freshly does it serve up Mr. Bennett's last experiences. Sir John Pilgrim will be recognized; so will Miss Rose Euclid; Denry's eyes are his maker's. Mr. Bennett has just been to New York; Denry goes there too. "I like New York irrevocably," said the former when he landed there; "This is my sort of place," announces Denry. The coincidence is nothing: it is the canny economy that is unmistakable. All very well for Mr. Bennett to assure us that the Card was "utterly indifferent to æsthetic beauty," that his "passion for literature was frail," and that the work of art he most admired was an oil-painting of a ruined castle, "in whose tower was a clock, which clock was a realistic timepiece whose figures moved and told the hour." These things do not deceive us. Little though it may appear to resemble it, that oil-painting is really a red-herring.

And if anybody asks sceptically why, if all this is thus, Mr. Bennett doesn't devote this conquering gift of *savoir-faire* to pulling off the great golden coups in reality instead of simply explaining how they could be done, the answer is easy. He does. Read his autobiography, *The Truth about an Author*; remember the straight road he has trod; remark how it is set with gilded *Milestones*. Denry Machin came up from the Potteries and took theatrical London by storm; it is merely because Mr. Bennett had already done the same. Denry Machin built a theatre, which he called "The Regent," that proved one of the most effective and profitable and intelligent undertakings of the year. Mr. Bennett has written a book, with exactly the same title, which is now going to do precisely the same.

III

Mr. Arnold Bennett's book about America[1] does not make us see Stars and Stripes: that is its charm. The

[1] *Those United States* By Arnold Bennett (Martin Secker).

States it describes are states of mind, *états d'âme*, oftener than the seven-and-forty parallelograms—and nobody properly appreciative of Mr. Bennett's idiosyncrasy, of the way his egotism works, will take that to mean it is but an account, an Anatole Frenchified account, of his own soul's adventures among those forty-seven masterpieces. It is other people's souls he is interested in: instead of putting the Paternal poser "*What is this engaging personality to me?*" his instinct is always to ask "*What sort of time would I be having if I were this engaging personality?*"—and in this account of a seven weeks' (less one day) trip we find him trying on successively, eagerly, as no other literary traveller ever has done, the shoes of lift-boys, millionaires, railway captains, kindergartners, telephone-girls, baseball players, hotel managers, newly married couples, professional murderers, and others. One of the great scenes in the book, one of the most richly representative, is his attempt to get into the pair worn by a certain giant of finance. It is recounted quite simply, without a trace of braggadocio, just as though it were the most natural episode in the world—but to us, looking on from afar, our imaginations heated by the tales of earlier travellers, it has a perfect Hop-o'-my-Thumb hardihood and bright fearlessness. Jack enters the Ogre's castle,

> Finally, we approached the sacred lair and fastness of the president, whose massive portrait I had already seen on several walls. Spaciousness and magnificence increased. Ceilings rose in height, marble was softened by the thick pile of carpets. Mahogany and gold shone more luxuriously. I was introduced into the vast ante-chamber of the presidential secretaries, and by the chief of them inducted through polished and gleaming barriers into the presence-chamber itself, a noble apartment, an apartment surpassing dreams and expectations, conceived and executed in a spirit of majestic prodigality. The president had not been afraid. And his costly audacity was splendidly justified of itself. This man had a sense of the romantic, of the dramatic,

of the fit. And the qualities in him and his *état-major* which had commanded the success of the entire enterprise were well shown in the brilliant symbolism of that room's grandiosity. . . . And there was the president's portrait again, gorgeously framed.

He came in through another door, an old man of superb physique. . . .

And then? Why, then—it really is delicious—he really is a Card—

"*What do you do with yourself in the evenings?*" asked Mr. Arnold Bennett. It is exactly what we all want to know, of course; what *do* these strange creatures, these monsters of legend, in their incredible world of sky-scrapers and gloating trusts—what *do* they do behind the façade? What happens at home, when there is no longer any audience, and the seven-leagued shoes are off and the feet on the fender? But it is a question nobody has hitherto had the courage, lacked the sentimentality, to let drive straight into their skins. In this particular instance, as it happens, it does not get all the way home. "A little disconcerted by this perhaps unaccustomed bluntness," the giant seems to have shuffled rather sheepishly. "Oh," said he absurdly, "I read insurance literature." Perhaps Jack ought to have had at him again, beaten down that clumsy guard—but, indeed, the confession is fairly full. The evasion avows even more than honesty, gives us more of the man: it is easy to translate that "insurance literature" into terms of domesticity; a pretty poor sort of giant, after all. And in other cases the disclosures are of the completest. Very effective, for instance, was Mr. Bennett's raid on the seraglio of the New York Telephone Exchange; and good, increasingly good, is the long last chapter, called "Human Citizens." The former reduced the fantastic curse of the telephone ("millions and millions of live filaments uniting all the privacies

of the organism and destroying them in order to make one immense publicity") to a human "convent of girls requiring sugar and couches and thirsting for love." And in the second there is a tale of a domestic squabble, a squabble that ends with a poached egg spinning across a breakfast-table, flung by on overstrung small wife, that positively humanizes the whole of New York. The flight of that egg is like a metaphor reversed. It is the flight of the American eagle stated in homelier terms.

But perhaps the finest effect of this faculty for reducing all things to the personal equation is the neat way it packs up and makes portable the whole of the physical side of the great American scene. In an old land like Italy, say, where so much that is essential to the onlooker lies outside the private life of the citizen, it probably would not work very well; but in America, the Land of Performance, where everything visible is a piece of apparatus, and the whole structure is indeed a house of Cards, this valuation of all things in terms of their net human value, their power for effectual "functioning," does shrink down the whole place, keeping it perfectly proportioned, and at the same time passes it over to us in a condition that requires only the addition of our own daily experience to swell it back to its full size, firm and vivid. Mr. Wells and Mr. James, the best packers we have had hitherto, employed a much less reliable process. They strove to vaporize what they saw, turned it into generalizations, and sent us over consignments of the spirit of the place, which we had to recondense in accordance with accompanying directions. They sent diagrams too, but in the main they followed the Franco-Paternal plan. Mr. Bennett delivers the goods. From generalizations of any sort, with immense self-denial, he steadily refrains. In the whole book there are only three: "It seems

to me that the brains and the imagination of America shine superlatively in the conception and ordering of vast organizations of human beings and of machinery, and of the two combined." "The rough broad difference between the American and the European business man is that the latter is anxious to leave his work, while the former is anxious to get to it." "The American citizen unquestionably has the most comfortable home in the world." These are all—and even these are reflectors to throw the light more sharply back upon the details. His bravura passages do the same. The most beautiful page in the book is the description of a dynamo. The best single phrase describes the perfect stopping of a train. His nocturne of New York is essentially an enumeration of facilities. And his appreciation of the poetry of the sky-scraper is not complete until he has taken us inside and shown us how it works:—

> But in the sky-scrapers there is a deeper romanticism than that which disengages itself from them externally. You must enter them in order to appreciate them, in order to respond fully to their complex appeal. . . . You come to those mysterious palisaded shafts with which the building and every other building in New York is secretly honeycombed, and the palisade is opened and an elevator snatches you up. I think of American cities as enormous agglomerations in whose inmost dark recesses innumerable elevators are constantly ascending and descending like the angels of the ladder. . . . The elevator ejects you. You are taken into dazzling daylight, into what is modestly called a business office. . . . You walk from chamber to chamber, and in answer to inquiry learn that the rent of this one suite—among so many—is over thirty-six thousand dollars a year! And you reflect that, to the beholder in the street, all that is represented by one narrow row of windows, lost in a diminishing chessboard of windows. And you begin to realize what a sky-scraper is, and the poetry of it.

So the whole place is anatomized, dismembered,

neatly transhipped, much as English castles are taken down brick by brick by Americans to be built up again over there. We get the working parts of the machine in exactly the form most universally intelligible. They fit together to form a working model, and a latch-key, any latch-key, is all that is required to set it lucidly going. And even the marks of exclamation in which it is packed and the abundance of "prodigiouses" have their use. They keep us aware of the scale. That must be a pretty colossal structure (we reflect) that could reduce the proved Samson of our letters to the condition of the dominie.

*Manchester Guardian*, 1911–13.

## MR. GRANVILLE BARKER AND AN ALIBI

### I

One of the chief joys of criticism is the joy of detection—detection not merely of some secret of style, some technical trick or caprice, but an actual hounding-down of a live human being, a regular, ding-dong, Dartmoor hue-and-cry. It is the greatest of games. I know nothing like it. Here in your hand you hold a book—a little cabinet of mimic scenes ; it is a magic box into which, by the aid of the talisman of letters, you can positively creep and then go roaming through as in a world. Well, all the sights that now spread round you, all the landscapes, gardens, groves, and all the flitting figures who pass to and fro and talk there, are simply parts of a private kingdom, a sort of Xanadu retreat, built by the artist for his perfect habitation—a secret place where he can fling off all disguise and live completely, with a sincerity impossible outside. There alone his soul, escaped, can frame a world to fit its needs ; there only does he dare to be himself. And there only, accordingly, can you hope to hunt him down, and catch him with his character unmasked. From the clues of dropped metaphors—by the trails of well-used rhythms—from scraps of conversation heard by eavesdropping among his characters—in and out, ruthlessly, you track him through the maze, until the last barrier breaks, and you are on him. A queer moment, that! One never quite

gets hardened—so staggering is it to discover how little he resembles the tax-paying and be-photographed *simulacra* who pass for him so plausibly outside. It is on these differences that you fasten, marking, measuring, comparing: your sketch-book has another scalp. After that he can rejoin his imposing outside proxies when he will—they will never impose on you again. You know them now for mere doorkeepers; you know exactly what they ward; and the majestic way they carry off their mischievous pretence will always fill you, when you meet them, with a deep and holy glee.

Brutal? Not a bit of it. They say a fox likes seeing scarlet, because it gives him, these tame times, his only opportunity for showing the world what he can really do; and though that is just as may be, it is at least quite certain that the true writer, in his ambuscade, simply pines to be pursued and passionately hopes that you may win. To be vanquished is his victory—to escape is his defeat; for cryptic, till you capture him, must still in part remain his work; enigmatic, all these groves without a guide. Those outcries of remonstrance that sometimes rend the air, expostulations about "unwarranted intrusions," are only raised when some poor critic, too perfectly deceived, begins tiresomely to dog the embodiments outside the gate, in the tedious manner of the illustrated interviewer. Only be shameless enough, merciless enough, only smash your way remorselessly into his shyest haunts and recesses, and your quarry, when you compel him to throw up his hands, will really be wanting to wave them with joy. For you will have done what in his heart of hearts he hungers for us all to do—won the freedom of his kingdom by the only possible way, gained the single certain key to its design—and are now, at last, in a position to appreciate properly the points of his self-created

world—that little world which is always, willy-nilly, whether he be realist or romanticist, a Barker, Bennett, Barrie, James, or Wells, just a mimic model of his vision of what the outside world would look like if only it were cleaned of its encumbering litter and debris. All our artists, in that sense, are Futurists, prophets; all their books are books of revelation.

II

And in the case of Granville Barker it is particularly necessary to remember these things, for in his case they are specially easily forgotten; and, forgotten, we go finely astray. For at the Kingsway Theatre, at the Savoy Theatre, at the Little Theatre, and elsewhere, the most convincing incarnations of him may be seen in full career, doing all sorts of splendid things with splendid dash and fire—so vivid, so vital, so charmingly alive, that the idea of there being any other completer Granville Barker becomes in their presence quite absurd. All the evidence leans so much the other way. Enviably famous as an actor; far and away our best producer; the only manager, apparently, in the whole of London, who can double a *succès d'estime* and a *succès fou*; but represented, as an author, by but a book and a bit[1]—and not an overwhelmingly successful book at that: the natural inference would seem to be that he is essentially an actor-manager-producer who has done a little writing with his left hand in off hours; and that any effectiveness the writing has is due to the technical tips and wrinkles passed on indulgently to the amateur author by his working partners.

And yet the truth, I am convinced, is almost exactly the reverse. The genuine Barker is the writing one—

[1] *Three Plays* and its annexe *The Madras House* (both published by Messrs. Sidgwick & Jackson).

it is the others who are the proxies—and though they have doubtless played into his hands a little, they have held those hands far more; and a truer statement of the relationship would be to say they owe the high distinction of their methods, the astonishingly civilized intelligence they display, to the fact that they have always had the unprecedented luck (unprecedented, that is to say, in English actor-managerdom) to be continually primed, and prompted, and fastidiously steered, by an absolutely pure-bred man of letters. Granville Barker is primarily a penman. He is fully visible only in his books. To take the other men for him, the triumphant, famed, effective ones, is to make the mistake of identifying an actor with his part. The real Barker, not triumphant yet, is an eager, wistful figure, wandering and working in a province nobody yet has troubled much to praise. And if you want to know the kind of man he really is, and what fine things he still will do, you must move the actor carefully aside, and the manager, and the producer, and rely solely on the signs of his caligraphy. He is just as much an actor-manager as Shakespeare was; no more. His natural kingdom is between boards, not upon them.

I sound jolly certain. How can one be so sure? Well, partly, I must own (though it is absurdly inconsistent), because I have just been wringing a confession of the truth of this suspicion from the lips of one of the other Barkers—the Great Adventurous, Kingsway Theatre one. "Yes," he admitted ruefully, "yes, more than anything, that is what I really want—to be allowed to write. I always have wanted that, and I suppose I always will. But what's the use? Until just recently I don't suppose my stuff earned the cost of typing it. I gave up writing for producing when I was thirty; and I always nurse a kind of half-determination that when I'm forty I'll give up producing again for writing.

. . . Once let me get this Repertory Theatre actually under way, a sound, solid, healthy, going concern, and you'll see me back at my desk like a shot. I've a half-finished play lying there now—the best idea I've had yet, I almost think—it tempts me terribly this minute, and I would like nothing better than to be at it hammer-and-tongs, out of reach of all these telephones and typewriters, my oak sported stubbornly day after day. . . ."

That alone, of course, though extraordinarily interesting, would not quite suffice to convince us—people do get such queer ideas about their penmanship. The real proof is the penmanship itself. It is on that one relies. Open *Three Plays* judiciously. Now, what is the first thing that catches your eye? Probably a certain significant little typographical, bibliographical, detail—certain little tickets bearing the dates of the composition of each play which have been lovingly tacked to the titles. They read like this:—

THE MARRYING OF ANN LEETE.
1899.

THE VOYSEY INHERITANCE.
1903–5.

WASTE.
1906–7.

There you have a clue of real importance. For all through those years, as no playgoer has yet forgotten, Mr. Barker was triumphantly pursuing his irresistible Courtship in Sloane Square; he was being subjected to the most stimulating imaginable temptations to exchange all his energy for the multiplying rewards that met his acting and producing. Yet in spite of these seductions, as these successive dates disclose, he was stealing back to his obscure desk and his pen;

stealing back at the bidding of an instinct so obstinate and stubborn that (as the dates reveal further) it could keep him doggedly grinding away at a single piece of work for two and even three years at a stretch. Very various are the ways by which a man reveals his inborn right to rank as writer; but the most convincing of all is perhaps a capacity for slowness. Facility, copiousness, a painless flux of words, are often evidence of an actual lack of the overpowering instinct, of a sunny innocence of the authentic knack of words. It is ability to write toilsomely that betrays the true poet: ability, not merely a stout willingness. It means that he really is cutting the letters out afresh, that he can see and use the virgin ore beneath our phrases. The happy scribbler scoops the latter up, suspecting nothing more, perhaps spending his spare energy, if he be very ambitious, on rearranging his tokens in the pretty pattern known as "style." But the genuine writer tugs and toils, poor soul, to unearth the living lode. It is something fixed and solid; he divines it long before he sees it; and so he can return to the same spot again and again, stick to it stubbornly year in and year out, with a stability that may easily look like inability, an immobility which means that much is being moved.

And that effect of a man fighting down to something dense as metal, as enduring as a marble pavement underneath, is exactly what we get confirmed when we pass from dates and titles to the actual words this tough persistency laid bare. Let us examine a slab of them. The first page will do. The curtain rises on the opening Act of *The Marrying of Ann Leete*; these are the printed stage-directions:—

> *The first three acts of the comedy pass in the garden at Markswayde, Mr. Carnaby Leete's house, near Reading, during a summer day, towards the close of the eighteenth century; the first act at four in the morning, the second shortly after*

*midday, the third near to sunset. The fourth act takes place one day in the following winter; the first scene in the hall at Markswayde, the second scene in a cottage some ten miles off.*

*This part of the Markswayde garden looks to have been laid out during the seventeenth century. In the middle a fountain; the centre-piece the figure of a nymph, now somewhat cracked, and pouring nothing from the amphora; the rim of the fountain is high enough and broad enough to be a comfortable seat.*

*The close turf around is in parts worn bare. This plot of ground is surrounded by a terrace three feet higher. Three sides of it are seen. From two corners broad steps lead down; stone urns stand at the bottom and top of the stone balustrades. The other two corners are rounded convexly into broad stone seats.*

*Along the edges of the terrace are growing rose-trees, close together; behind these, paths; behind those, shrubs and trees. No landscape is to be seen. A big copper beech overshadows the seat on the left. A silver birch droops over the seat on the right. The trees far to the left indicate an orchard, the few to the right are more of the garden sort. It is the height of summer, and, after a long drought, the rose-trees are dilapidated.*

*It is very dark in the garden. Though there may be by now a faint morning light in the sky, it has not penetrated yet among these trees. It is very still, too. Now and then the leaves of a tree are stirred, as if in its sleep; that is all. Suddenly a shrill, frightened but not tragical scream is heard. After a moment* ANN LEETE *runs quickly down the steps and on to the fountain, where she stops, panting.* LORD JOHN CARP *follows her, but only to the top of the steps, evidently not knowing his way.* ANN *is a girl of twenty; he an English gentleman, nearer forty than thirty.*

I call that quite wonderful workmanship. It is as economical as a cablegram ordering parts of a machine; and yet it has grace, charm, and elegance, a silvery slenderness, a quivering "life" like the spring of a sword-blade: for once in a way, by some magic of fusion, the incompatible qualities of curtness and charm are made one. That is evident enough;

nobody can miss it; but when we proceed to say that the reason is simply that it is the work of a born man of letters, we must discriminate, or there will be some confusion. For by "man of letters" I don't *at all* mean a man delighting in grace-notes, eager to speak of trees stirring "*as if in their sleep*," careful to say "*near to sunset*" instead of "towards evening." Rather I mean a man possessing a certain ruthless, Röntgen faculty which is actually the enemy of literary diapering—a keen cathodic sense that bites and pierces through mere textures till it reaches a bony anatomy beneath—and that only knows it has reached it (this is the uncanny thing) because it suddenly sees its vague perceptions contracting into a shrunken, stringent formula of words. Does that sound too theoretical? Honestly, I believe it to be the way the literary nerve usually does its eerie work in actual practice. A mind equipped with it is restless, uneasy, insecure, until the shapes about it are reduced to this strict structure—and the consequence is that the more passionately and implacably it peers at life the nearer does it get to something verbal. What is an artifice to most of us is for them essential nature: reality and the written word are one. Their work is not a "copy" but a capture; they do not so much describe as disclose. There is no melting down experience to re-cast in printers' type, no wasteful translation of living into language; life to them is a cloudy body with a skeleton of sentences —they have but to strip it clean to find their phrase. *Vita longa, ars brevis*—that is how they see it. At the centre of all things is the Word.

And it is of such words that this *Ann Leete* overture is composed. That is why its brusqueness is identical with beauty, and why, although apparently all boiled down to the grittiest residuum of fact, there has been no loss of literary grace. And that

is why Mr. Barker writes so slowly. It is true that he and men like him (they are rarer than we think, perhaps) see nothing, feel nothing, that isn't a sentence; but how they have to stare and strain before they feel and see! They have to cut their way through the clogging half-actual that contents the placid rest of us, they have to turn their pens into two-handed swords. All their impressions are expressions—but they have to fight like fury to receive them: numb as death remains that nerve of theirs until it touches solid ore—it responds to nothing but pure metal. And so they have to lug and lever living obstacles, instead of lightly flickering the leaves of a dictionary. They are handling brute realities, not stringing little inky signs. Their alphabet is literally phenomenal.

And a most beautiful instance of this breaks at once into view if we now take another step forward. *The Marrying of Ann Leete* has innumerable merits; it is our one genuine modern tragedy of manners; as the work of a young man of twenty-four or five it is astonishingly wise as well as clever; and its dramatic deftness is a joy. But the special point to notice here is the way the movements of its characters reveal and illustrate its author's way of writing with lumps of life instead of nouns and verbs. The thing seen and the thing to say are for him so identical that he has in the strict sense no "medium" at all; and the result is that his instinct for cadence and rhythm works movingly among the very bones of his subject. Men and women form his syllables, and their movements are his rhymes; this play, for instance, is physically rhythmical, full of exquisite optical echoes and refrains. The most poignant of these recurrences, a kind of bodily alliteration, is probably Ann's unconscious repetition of her father's shuddering attitude of revulsion an Act before

(pages 16–36). But the most beautiful, the most memorable, is the visible chord that comes and goes, reversing and returning, dying down and then ascending, through a shifting series of softest variations, from the instant the curtain first goes up and Ann makes her swift appearance (ANN LEETE *runs quickly down the steps*) to the moment it descends whilst she mounts slowly out of sight. I mean the optical descant, the physical phrase, made by her passage up or down a scale of steps—a *motif* that is repeated, subtly varied, through every scene that is to follow; and that finally forms, transposed adroitly, the deep concluding cadence, ending the piece upon a slow ascending chord.

ANN *goes to the little door and opens it.* ABUD *takes up the candle. He lights her up the stairs.*

III

We follow Ann. We pass out of the end of this first play and into the one that comes next—*The Voysey Inheritance*, the middle compartment of the book; and a startling change is instantly observed. The best description of *The Marrying of Ann Leete* is still Arthur Symons': "The play opens in the dark," he wrote, "and remains for some time brilliantly ambiguous. People, late eighteenth-century people, talk with bewildering abruptness, with not less bewildering point; they, their motives, their characters, swim slowly into daylight. A courtly indolence, an intellectual blackguardism, is in the air; people walk, it seems, aimlessly in and out, and the game goes on; it fills one with excitement, the excitement of following a trail." Now the trail leads, as we have seen, towards reality; it is out of this artificial garden with its "brilliant ambiguities" that Ann longs and determines to escape: she wants to

face facts, to know herself, to meet stark life—it is for this that she breaks away from all the mannered courtliness, and lights that pathetic cottage candle—"We've all been in too great a hurry getting civilized. False dawn. I mean to go back." Well, it certainly seems, when we follow her, as though the escape had been complete; we push open the page and are instantly surrounded by the very atmosphere of Fact.

*The Office of Voysey and Son is in the best part of Lincoln's Inn. Mr. Voysey's own room, into which he walks about twenty past ten of a morning, radiates enterprise besides. There is polish on everything; on the windows, on the mahogany of the tidily packed writing-table that stands between them, on the brass-work of the fire-place in the other wall, on the glass of the fire-screen which preserves only the pleasantness of a sparkling fire, even on Mr. Voysey's hat as he takes it off to place on the little red-curtained shelf behind the door. . . .*

*The Voysey dining-room at Chislehurst, when children and grandchildren are visiting, is dining-table and very little else. And at this moment in the evening, when five or six men are sprawling back in their chairs, and the air is clouded with smoke, it is a very typical specimen of the middle-class English domestic temple. . . . It has the usual red-papered walls (like a reflection, they are, of the underdone beef so much consumed within them), the usual varnished woodwork which is known as grained oak; there is the usual, hot, mahogany furniture; and, commanding point of the whole room, there is the usual black marble sarcophagus of a fire-place. . . . On the mantelpiece stands, of course, a clock; at either end a china vase filled with paper spills. . . .*

Decidedly, this looks like Reality. No expense has been spared; that is to say, no economy. It would have been so easy for our man of letters, fastidious and elegant, to have indulged his love of grace by introducing some amenities—for amenities there would be, even in chaste Chislehurst, even in the Chislehurst of the 'eighties. But he has determined there shall

be no more dalliance or compromise: like Ann, he has resolved to Face the Facts. Very well. So far, so good. This is undeniably a nineteenth-century interior. That is an unmistakable top-hat. These are certainly the red-papered walls of old England. . . .

And yet—there is something queer about it all. There is a certain strangeness in the air, a lack of nitrogen, a disconcerting quality of dream. If that hat of Mr. Voysey's suddenly began quietly turning somersaults on its little red-curtained shelf, we would not feel tremendously surprised. For in the accentuated realism of these rooms there is something oddly like the bright veracity of the streets of shops in harlequinade; and although the characters all apparently behave with the most absolute naturalness, we watch them as though they were figures moving in a void. Why should this be so? What invalidates the atmosphere? What can make a grained oak sideboard seem bizarre?

Well, put quite simply, it is because these rooms are haunted. There is a skeleton in that sideboard. The characters are under a spell. They are bowed down by a strange doom that would make any home seem eerie. The true Voysey inheritance is something far more fateful than the black bequest that burdens Edward. And it is this lurking legacy, of which they never speak, that secretly moves their minds and plucks their limbs.

Now this pervasive Influence—this mysterious super-Voysey—this dread ghost, *diabolus ex machina*—could indeed be named at once in three short words (whereat the reader makes a sporting plunge and guesses it)—but to do so would not only be a trifle lacking in finesse, it would also be actually misleading and unfair. The correct thing to do, the safe and decent way to track him down, is to continue our staid detective tactics—proceeding now to tap the play's red-papered walls for

any signs of secret passages or dummy panels. And as we do this, as we examine the actual structure of these scenes, we do discover, beyond question, that all these poor characters are, literally, the victims of an elaborate Plot. Of *the* plot, in fact—the plot of the play, the story which drives the scenes round—the excellent invention of the elder Voysey's machinations—as neat as anything of Poe's or Maupassant's. As ingenious, as artificial, as "romantic" as that—and therefore absolutely fatal as a mainspring meant to drive a middle-classical clock constructed to tell Chislehurst time with stolid truthfulness. You don't get "realism" by merely changing centuries, by substituting a deed-box for duels; and it is a fact that if you only move its mahogany furniture aside, the whole of this play will be found to have been laid out as artificially as that seventeenth-century garden at Markswayde. Offering itself to us as a simple "slice of life," it is really impaled, all the time, on the most fantastic toasting-fork of criminal pathology and fairy-tale finance. And so, although the characters' reactions to the prongs are observed with the most scrupulous fidelity and reproduced with the most wonderful skill, though they wear unquestionable top-hats and smoke real cigars, they still affect us as uncanny creatures, not exactly of our clay, for they are in fact being secretly goaded by dilemmas as abnormal as those which maddened Mr. Wells's Invisible Man. The mechanism that skewers them, spitting each of them in turn until we have the entire row displaying each his special squirm, is every bit as arbitrary as Carnaby Leete's rapier, as recondite as his political intrigues.

If that were all, it would be deeply interesting—it is such a capital example of the way a man's sense of form must have its fling, unconsciously indulging itself by deftly shaping an intricate story

at the very moment it is vowing to practise self-denial and be strictly matter-of-fact and plain. But there is even more in it than that. There's that Influence; there's our Ghost. Given Mr. Barker's unconquerable flair for shapeliness; given, too, his determination to deal with plain reality and "facts"; we have still to explain why he should have let the first frustrate the second by devoting itself to the careful manufacture of this particularly metallic sort of plot. The Voyseys could have been stirred to a display of their individualities, and the necessary form and coherence supplied, by the use of a sustaining story much more typical of such a home—at least, so one believes, so finds the world. Then why this special spindle, so eccentric and bizarre? Why this device of an elvish solicitor playing old Puck with his practice—tossing his clients' coin about in a kind of colossal roulette with an impudence that makes our economics look ridiculous, that shows up our solemn share-holding as the merest shibboleth and sham, and exposes the stupendous silliness of a social system which depends upon such unproductive middle-management with its inevitable sequel of treadmill waste of genuine power?

The echoes of the definition give the answer. [*Enter Ghost.*] Impossible not to hear in that contemptuous indictment the very accent of our fierce Adelphic oracle, the swish of the lacerating knout of cutting logic which he wields. Yes—it has to be admitted—shade of Shaw! Had his bony Fabian forefinger never beckoned Mr. Barker, the elder Voysey, I feel sure, would have remained an honest father, and his children would have been allowed to live their lives (and live them before us entertainingly) with all their charming Chislehurst simplicity.

But now we must move carefully. There is immense need here for clearness. Upon no other question have

Mr. Barker's critics gone more wildly wrong than on this one of the influence of Shaw; and if I summon the old bogey here once more it is in the hope, if not of laying it, then of locating it so exactly that superstition in the future will not imagine it detects it where it isn't. It is amazing, it is heartrending, it fills one with despair for common eyesight, to watch the wholesale way Mr. Barker has been bracketed with Mr. Shaw; to read the ordinary comments that are made about *The Voysey Inheritance* or *Waste* you would conclude that G.B. was simply G.B.S. *minus* S. Whereas the truth (and to some extent the trouble, too) is that they are temperamentally and technically entirely unakin. They are as different as Ulster is from Ireland (Mr. Barker is mainly Scotch) or as dogma is from dream; their dramatic methods are just as unlike as their collars or their clothes, or their respective ages, or their eyebrows. Especially the eyebrows! Consider them, I beg. G.B.S.'s run truculently upwards and outwards with the aggressive twirl of a born fanatic and fighter. Mr. Barker's slant precisely the other way about; they rise towards the centre with a kind of quizzical perplexity to make an expression of whimsical interrogation. G.B.S.'s are the bristling eyebrows of a man who has made the Englishman's castle his home, and is intolerantly putting it to rights. Mr. Barker's are those of a kind of puzzled pierrot, of a man incurably capable of wonderment and whimsy—one of those who never can feel quite at home in the real world, to whom even the Englishman's castle is still a dark tower of romance, and who eyes it with a quaint and comical dismay. And their way of holding their pens is just as different. Their methods of expression are as unlike as their expressions. Mr. Shaw's sentences are arrowy, as rigid as ruled lines. Mr. Barker likes quaintly qualifying clauses—oblique parentheses that

slant out of the strict logic of the line, with the effect of a deprecating shrug. He has to write sentences —but he refuses to pronounce them; which is exactly what Shaw can't help doing. Mr. Shaw's stage-directions are commands; Mr. Barker's, indications—he has a trick of using a terminal "perhaps." "*There are many books in the room, hardly any pictures, a statuette, perhaps.*" "*You can discern a bookcase filled with heavy volumes—law reports, perhaps.*" "*A certain liking for metaphysical turns of speech show an Eastern origin, perhaps.*" It is an odd constructional trick, and it seems to me beautifully characteristic. Even in the faces of his characters it is repeatedly reflected, in expressions of half-humorous dubiety. Philip Madras is constantly raising his eyebrows *quizzically, whimsically*; even old Voysey's eyebrows have an elvish twist. Whimsical eyebrows, in short, and a tone of charming deprecation—we really needn't search for other traits. Such clues may seem slight, but indeed they are cardinal—quite enough to authorize us to deny as preposterous the suggestion that Barker is simply Shaw without the bite, or that these *Plays* are *Plays for Puritans, Vol. II.* Mr. Shaw wears a black cap; Mr. Barker a white. He watches us ordinary mortals with a kind of wistful wonder, like a wandering pierrot searching for the truth. Mr. Shaw, quite convinced he has the truth in his pocket, flings it in our faces with contempt. The result being that the former is the master of an art, and the latter a—G.B.Sc. And it is all summed up sensibly in the way one of them ends his utterances with an uncompromising bang—the other with a speculative "perhaps."

IV

But there is a spark of truth in all mistakes, even the smokiest; and there is a gleam of justice here.

It is this: that although Mr. Barker's attitude when writing is exactly the opposite of Mr. Shaw's, although he sits precisely on the other side of the table, yet, partly for that reason, whenever he glances up, his view of life naturally includes the figure of his virile *vis-à-vis*. There is not a scrap of Mr. Shaw in Mr. Barker's technique; but there is all of him in Mr. Barker's world. The distinction is a deep one. I would like to draw it in red ink. It probably applies to more cases than our subject's. "I suppose I owe more to Shaw," Mr. Barker once said to me, "than to any other man alive. He is certainly my very greatest friend." Now, intimacy and debt would doubtless both be largely the result of the very divergencies of temperament we have been noting—the dissimilarities which make the younger man a kind of interrogative spectator and the elder a spectacular asserter. You are to figure Mr. Barker, twenty years ago, approaching life with a charmed eagerness and wonder. He was eager, he was earnest, he had swiftness and sincerity, he had genius and the *naïveté* of genius; he was curious about ideas, he was humbly anxious to learn to live and to write; and he was earning his living as an actor. It was humanly impossible for such a youngster to avoid being fascinated by the man who was at that time the most exhilarating literary figure in the Town as well as our most effective playwright; and the world the young man contemplated became, therefore, pretty quickly a world thickly populated by his great friend's prophecies and projects and ideas. It was rather a beautiful relationship, I think. Old man and young man, dogmatist and dreamer, like some new Virgil and Dante of our day, they descended together all the circles of—the hell in *Man and Superman*; and although Mr. Barker, left to himself, would probably never have explored the metaphysical Avernus

—would have thought of it, indeed, as a mere back-stairs to actual life—it was inevitable that, having once explored it in such company, it should become a fixed and vital part of his mental picture of reality —the central court, indeed, round which the rest of the rooms of the national house were arranged, or at any rate the stokehold, the engine-room, the power-chamber, without a knowledge of which nothing else could be understood, no remotest drawing-room or draper's shop or studio; and without a representation of which, therefore, no reproduction of actuality could possibly be genuinely complete.

That is why we got dramatized social economics used as the material for that mainspring in *The Voysey Inheritance*. And that is why (to move on) the subject-matter of the next play, *Waste*, is complicated and (as I think) to some extent clouded by a dramatized projection of another of Mr. Shaw's visions—his noble conception of the teacher as the priest of the future and the child as the world's appointed pioneer—the creed he happens to have restated in *Misalliance*.

"What is a child?" he asks, in the Preface to that play; answering, with the precision of poetry, "A fresh attempt to produce the just man made perfect, that is, to make humanity divine . . . the child feels the desire of the Life Force (often called the Will of God) and you cannot feel it for him." And "My point is this," said Horace Trebell in *Waste*, ten years earlier (his part being played, by the way, by Mr. Barker himself), "My point is this: A man's demand to know the exact structure of a fly's wing, and his assertion that it degrades any child in the street not to know such a thing, is a religious revival, a token of spiritual hunger. . . . Give power to the future, not to the past. Give responsibility, give responsibility, *give the child power*." "The Church," he says again, amplifying his

project to reorganize schools on the royal lines of cathedrals, making secular teaching as sacred as the creeds, "The Church has assimilated much in her time. Do you think it wise to leave agnostic science at the side of the plate?"

"I think that this craving for common knowledge is a new birth in the mind of man; and if your Church won't recognize that soon, by so much will she be losing grip for ever over men's minds. . . . I'm offering you a new Order of men and women who'll serve God by teaching His children. . . . Teaching, true teaching, is learning, and the wish to know is going to prevail against any creed. . . . The tradition of self-sacrifice and fellowship in service for its own sake—that's the spirit we've to capture and keep. Education is religion, and those who deal in it are priests without any laying on of hands."

"I have only one belief myself," he adds (Trebell, remember, not necessarily Barker), "that is, human progress—yes, progress over many obstacles and by many means. I have no ideals. I believe it is statesmanlike to use all the energy you find, turning it into the nearest channel that points forward." It is a restatement of the faith on which Mr. Shaw's eyes have always been indomitably fixed,[1] but it is not an echo of Mr. Shaw. It is a new description, by a younger man, a humbler, gentler, and more generous man, of the writing on the rock which the fierce elder has laid bare; and it is used by him with a respectfulness, both to his art and to life, which the exasperated prophet has never had the patience to display. It is the difference, once more, between the Man of Letters and the Man of Laws. Shaw has written many plays in support of just these creeds—*Misal-*

[1] Compare, for instance, Mr. Shaw's fine declaration in the Preface to *Man and Superman*: "This is the true joy of life—the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap-heap."

*liance* is but the last of a long list; but his attitude in all of them, and especially the later ones, is that of a man who takes the actual play-making contemptuously because he is so sure of the importance of the creed. It is another of the many anomalies of this most amazing man, this most unreasonable rationalist. Because Shaw's characters have solemn truths to tell, he lets them play about absurdly; there is the keenest of logic in everything they say, but the most reckless incoherence in their actions. The structure of *Misalliance*, for example, is all over the shop—it is even more like a pantomime than *Pygmalion*; it really *is* a misalliance—a most immoral union of spiritual sobriety and dramatic misbehaviour. Confidently aware of his own rectitude and keen ethical purpose, he feels at liberty to dodge the toil of honest drama. His work is our latest and greatest example of the way moral convictions can lead to technical licentiousness.

But Mr. Barker is quite incapable of these contempts. He takes his work with a fine seriousness and (Scotch blood, perhaps) he jokes about morals with difficulty. *Waste* is the ironic example. For to satisfy his artistic honesty he had to make that political motive an absolutely integral part of the human action of the play; and the result is an intricate alternation of the abstract and the visible, a microscopically close mesh of party theories and personal passions, that defies any attempt at instinctive separation, and so keeps the attention hovering ambiguously between the pure excitement of a drama of ideas and the excitement of a drama of individuals. It is wonderfully wrought—a triumph of weaving; the more closely one peers into the texture, the more one is amazed by the patient fineness of the thread; the way Trebell's belief in the future and his bloodless passion for his policy is brought at last into

frank and fatal conflict with the situation which his inhumanity and his faith have both produced, is a piece of technical construction beyond praise. Amy O'Connell's child would have lived if she had thought Trebell cared for her; but she was insignificant to him beside his work: his fight for the future of the children of men, that is to say, actually destroyed his own offspring. But despite this diabolically deft dovetailing much of the structure still remains abstract and cold. Mr. Barker's conscience couldn't rest until, in the name of honest craftsmanship, it had equipped Trebell with a credible Parliamentary Bill; and I think that Bill proved too heavy. No audience could meet it. The dialogue in the opening Act, with a group of charming ladies growing coquettish about by-elections, and bridling over Nonconformity, has a quality of algebraic unreality far more bloodless and irritating than the intrigues in *Ann Leete*. It seems certain that the planks of a political platform make poor building material for a play.

## V

So that when we come to the end of this first book, when the curtain falls upon *Waste*, and we prepare to step across to *The Madras House*, the question of whether Mr. Barker did right to follow Ann still remains largely unsolved. It was brave of our puzzled pierrot to resolve to face the facts of life, to be an honest realist and no mere elegant; but so far the facts he has tackled have been terrible tough ones—Fabian facts, in short—economics and politics—desperate material for any save a born doctrinaire. Would the experience discomfit him? Would he fall back on artifice, on eighteenth-century gardens and rapiers? Or would he press gamely forward in search of a subject at once romantic and real—as

modern as Denmark Hill, yet as human as *Hamlet* —quite as important as the Poor Law, yet as passionate as poetry?—for such a subject, of course, does exist.

In *The Madras House* all these questions are answered. Every wall of it announces that pierrot has won. It is true that its subject-matter is the same as that of *Man and Superman* and *Getting Married.* But that happens to be the theme of themes to dramatize emotionally; it is also the subject-matter of *Romeo and Juliet.* "What's the purpose of it all?" asks Philip Madras plaintively. "What do we slow-breeding civilized people get out of Love, and the beauty of women? . . . for which we do pay rather a big price"—and the play's formative effort, the general creative current which urges its characters into their successive relationships, is simply an attempt to reach forward to some new, sounder conception of this dreadfully obstinate instinct of Sex. Call it a force or a failing, there the confounded element is, the most imperative quality in life, reducing lords of creation like poor old Constantine Madras ("with his view of life as a sort of love-chase") to ignominiously amorous absurdities, and turning exquisitely civilized creatures like Jessica ("with her beauty, her dresses, her music and art") into civilization's subtlest enemy; and the question we have yet to answer honestly is how, exactly, we are going to utilize it, what mental attitude or fresh convention we mean to frame for its control now that the "romantic," the Victorian, way of regarding it has come to seem both too sentimental and too gross. "From seventeen to thirty-four," complains poor Constantine, with cause, "the years which a man should consecrate to the acquiring of political virtue, wherever he turns he is distracted, provoked, tantalized, by the barefaced presence of women. How's

he to keep a clear brain for the larger issues of life? La belle Hélène's new hat . . . it's provocative. Its intention is that none of the world's work shall be done while it's about. And when it's always about I honestly confess again that I cannot do my share." And, "We've so organized the world's work," admits even Philip, "as to make companionship between men and women a very artificial thing." What are we going to do about it? A Social Question this, quite as urgent, to say the least, as inquiries into the economic naughtiness of the Share-Holding System or the possibilities of founding a State secular Church; and yet concerned entirely with personality and passion—the special materials of poetry and romance! Rightly considered, indeed, it is simply the crucial practical question of our time; until we answer it we cannot move another step. The strongest force in our world (this is what it comes to) runs counter to our world's will towards efficiency; or, if you prefer to give the dilemma every honour, to take what the ineffable Mr. State calls "High-Ground in this matter, gentlemen," and credit "the noblest Instinct of all—the Instinct to Perpetuate the Race" with its one material utility—even then we only get the spectacle of a kind of perpetual procrastination—one generation stultifying itself to produce another, no better—an unbearably ludicrous treadmill. We can surely improve on that. We want a new point of view. The old-fashioned sentimentality helped things on for a little, it kept primitive appetite rebuked and ashamed; but we are outgrowing its unrealities and we are beginning to be uneasily aware that its very pretty-prettinesses, its chivalry, its respectfulness, its ascription to womenkind of all kinds of imaginary modesties, is actually only a subtler kind of provocative, that there is no aphrodisiac like pink-ribbon poetizings. We need a new convention: What is it

to be? Shall it be an athletic austerity, fastidious, fiercely fit, finely disdainful of the slack slaveries physical passion entails, tolerating perforce, but contemptuously, as we have to tolerate all the other absurd ignominies and crudities of the flesh, the clumsy processes of physical reproduction? Or is there perhaps something finer even than this?—a new honesty between the sexes, a new comradeship and truce, a mutual admission of duplicities and dangers—an alliance as frank as friendship, both sides pooling their weapons, their wiles, their desires, and using them companionably to win a shared ideal, so that the strongest force in our world and our world's will towards efficiency become at length for the first time identified. A new Puritanism, or co-partnership?—that seems the choice; and, to enable us to make it, we need all the information we can find. "I do so hate that farmyard world of sex," says Philip Madras moodily, "men and women always treating each other in this unfriendly way. . . . Hasn't Humanity come of age at last? Finery sits so well on children. And they strut and make love so absurdly. . . . But I don't see why we men and women should not find all happiness, and beauty too, in soberer purposes. . . ." He voices a discontent, a secret self-contempt, that nips us all, uncomfortably conscious of discrepancies.

And, voicing it, he makes the choice much easier: he enables us to see so much more clearly that we crave. For these wordless problems of relationship are supremely the questions which the dramatist (novelist or playwright) is specially appointed to illumine and explore. Problem plays? There are no others half so proper; all others deal with questions that might be better considered and discussed in text-book prose. But the artist is the scientist of sex; he is the only psychologist worth listening to. Actual experiments are so cumbrous, so confused, the results of experience

are all dissembled or suppressed; the wisdom gained in life's laboratories never leaves the hand that finds it, there is practically no racial accumulation of this lore; Science itself frankly flounders helplessly among mendacities and guess-work, its chief material plainly falsified phenomena. It is only by the aid of the miracle of imaginative creation that experiments can be attempted, possibilities examined and compared; and since in matter so infinitely unstable no reliable generalizations can be made, since the exception is always here the rule, the results which art obtains, its divinations and discoveries, can only be presented in the individualized, undogmatic form of fictive art, the novel's or the drama's. "I am inclined to think," Mr. Wells has owned, in one of his tractates, "that the only really profitable discussion of sexual matters is in terms of individuality, through the novel, the film, the play, autobiography or biography of the frankest sort." And he himself in *The Passionate Friends* and in *Marriage* has offered us, as we have seen, such dramatized discussions, not unprofitably.

But just as much as a book like *Marriage* is superior to a work on Marriage, so is *The Madras House* method more reliable than Mr. Wells's. *Marriage* and *Getting Married* are exciting discussions conducted with plenty of picturesque movement and gesture by groups of characters appointed by their authors for that purpose; but the dramatic briskness of these debates is largely due to the fact that the authors keep the game in their own hands, deal out opinions to the speakers, revise the pros and the cons, and know the conclusion that will be arrived at before they begin. *The Madras House* is much more wonderful than that. What goes on in it is not a symposium; it is a séance. The author is not wiser than his characters, does not employ them as spokesmen to give utterance to his firmly formed opinions; rather, he

is briefed by them to transmit their experiences—instead of Mr. Barker's characters being his "medium," he in a special sense is theirs. He sets them free, in his mimic, magic world, whence all accidentals have been banished, where they can move and change and respond without any interference, and lets them evolve there as they will, trusting the spark of vitality with which, as creator, he has endowed them to guide them in accordance with the final laws of life; and so they actually move on into the future, explore the parting paths—scouts sent in advance of the rest of us, clairvoyant pioneers (more wonderful than any spirits raised by incantation), from whose bearing and messages we can measure in due time the safety and direction of the road. . . . What those messages would be Mr. Granville Barker had no guess when he devised Philip Madras, breathed life into his bones, and endowed him with this astounding gift of independence. Twenty years younger than Wells or Shaw, devoid as yet of any dogmas, much more anxious to learn than to teach, he launched his puppet into the unknown much as one might loose a kite to discover what influences were at work in the enviable upper air. Unlike Trafford, unlike Tanner, Philip Madras is not predestined; he changes with the scenes, his opinions develop with the play. It is indeed true that he proposes to stand for the L.C.C.—but that dubious ambition is only the result of his desire to learn, not to teach: he, too, is a pierrot on pilgrimage, searching for the truth; his character is formed after the curtain goes up, not before. We watch the make-up being affixed.

And the result of this is not only a beautiful loyalty to life, an exquisitely natural unfurling and effoliation of character and motive, undeflected by any arbitrary concept or merely intellectual creed; there is also a deliciously fluent pose, balance, grace of construction and design, impossible save under such unfettered and

uncompromised conditions. The obstinacy of Beauty is astonishing! She comes flying back to this play, a glittering invader, gloriously flushing and confirming all its action, at the very moment when Mr. Barker, the good Scotsman, doubtless felt he had grimly, nobly turned his back upon her lures. "It's a muddled country," says Philip in Act I, "and one's first instinct is to be rhetorical about it, to write poetry and relieve one's feelings." But the decent thing to do, he sees, is something sterner, harsher; pierrot must stop writing verse and Face the Facts. "We have to teach Mildred what love of the world means, Jessica," he concludes, facing his wife frankly, in the last scene. "Even if it's an uncomfortable business. Even if it means not adding her to that aristocracy of good feeling and good taste, the very latest of class distinctions. I tell you I haven't come by these doubts so easily. *Beautiful sounds and sights and thoughts are all of the world's heritage I care about. Giving them up is like giving up my carefully created soul out of my keeping before I die.*" Neither knew it when they made the sacrifice—but that is of course the only way by which a soul can be given completest life. Bent only on being honest, Mr. Barker has never been more charming; the constructional device adopted simply for the sake of perfect candour and completeness—the desire of keeping Philip on mid-stage from first to last —produced spontaneously a scheme of composition even more decoratively delightful than the elaborately planned and measured parterre acts in *Ann Leete*. Much his least artificial play, *The Madras House* is also by far his most romantic. The "beautiful sounds and sights and thoughts" which he deemed it his duty to relinquish have been graciously replaced by others fairer still; and his very refusal to end his last scene with a ringing dogma or deduction, to round things off with a regular "conclusion," gives the close a quality

of tenderness, of ripeness and clear faith, which seems to flush the faces of the characters with the colour of the finest climax in the world—the infallible finale we call Dawn :—

JESSICA. Phil . . . I sometimes think I'd sooner have been married to your father.

PHILIP. Why?

JESSICA. If you went on as he did instead of as you do . . . I should be sorry . . . I should despise you . . . but it would string me up and add to my self-respect enormously! (*Then a little appealingly*) But it's when you're inhuman, Phil . . . that I'm ever so little tempted. . . .

PHILIP (*contrite at once*). I know I am. (*Then he gets up and stands looking into the fire, and what he says is heartfelt.*) But I do so hate that farmyard world of sex—men and women always treating each other in this unfriendly way—that I'm afraid it hardens me a bit.

JESSICA (*from her side, gently, with just a look at him*). I hate it too—but I happen to love you, Phil.

*They smile to each other.*

PHILIP. Yes, my dear. If you'd kindly come over here . . . I should like to kiss you.

JESSICA. I won't. You can come over to me.

PHILIP. Will you meet me half-way?

*They meet half-way and kiss as husband and wife can. They stand together, looking into the fire.*

PHILIP. Do you know the sort of world I want to live in?

JESSICA. Should I like it?

PHILIP. Hasn't Humanity come of age at last?

JESSICA. Has it?

PHILIP. Mayn't we hope so? Finery sits so well on children. And they strut and make love so absurdly . . . even their quarrelling is all in good faith and innocence. But I don't see why we men and women should not find all happiness—and beauty too—in soberer purposes. And with each other—why not always some touch of the tranquil understanding which is yours and mine, dear, at the best of moments?

JESSICA (*happily*). Do you mean when we sometimes suddenly want to shake hands?

PHILIP (*happily too*). That's it. And I want an art and a culture that shan't be just a veneer on savagery . . . but it must spring in good time from the happiness of a whole people.

JESSICA *gives herself one little shake of womanly common sense.*

JESSICA. Well, what's to be done?

PHILIP (*nobody more practical than he*). I've been making suggestions. We must learn to live on a thousand a year . . . put Mildred to a sensible school . . . and I must go on the County Council. That's how these great spiritual revolutions work out in practice, to begin with.

JESSICA (*as one who demands a right*). Where's my share of the job?

PHILIP (*conscious of some helplessness*). How is a man to tell you? There's enough to choose from.

JESSICA (*the burden of her sex's present fate upon her*). Ah, you're normal. Nobody sizes you up as a good man or a bad man —pretty or plain. There's a trade for bad women and several professions for plain ones. But I've been taught how to be charming and to like dainty clothes. And I dare say I'm excitable and emotional . . . but I can't help it. I'm well off, married to you, I know. You do make me forget I'm a female occasionally.

PHILIP. Male and female created He them . . . and left us to do the rest. Men and women are a long time in the making, aren't they?

JESSICA (*enviously*). Oh . . . you're all right.

PHILIP (*with some humble knowledge of himself*). Are we?

JESSICA. But I tell you, Phil, it isn't so easy for us. You don't always let us have the fairest of chances, do you?

PHILIP. No, I grant it's not easy. But it's got to be done.

JESSICA. Yes. . . .

*She doesn't finish, for really there is no end to the subject. But for a moment or two longer, happy together, they stand looking into the fire.*

I said, when we started out, that one of the chief joys of criticism was the joy of detection. There is only one other as great—that of indulging in praise. But when the first pleasure leads you at last imperatively to the second—what extraordinary happiness your craft brings you then! Mine, this minute, is only

shadowed by one memory—the recollection of that half-finished play and of three strong-limbed Granville Barkers—Granville Barker the Manager, Granville Barker the Producer, and Granville Barker the Repertory Propagandist—forcibly holding the author away from it. I admit, indeed, that their efforts may have done him good in the past, that it was probably they, and especially the self-sacrificing Propagandist, who compelled him to "give up his carefully created soul out of his keeping" in order that they might return it improved. But, all the same, I feel the time has now come for him to possess that soul in peace again. We may or may not need a Repertory Theatre. But I am certain we badly need Barker's release. And so I turn propagandist myself, take sides with one of the simulacra, and insist that the soundest thing we drama-lovers can do is to get this Repertory Theatre on its feet without delay.

But after that, Mr. Barker, no more Haroun-al-Raschiding. These doublings — and treblings — must cease. We have conquered your kingdom; that means, you must rule it. Criticism fights only for others' liberty; she pursues to set free. More certain than ever that the Word is your business, she begs you literally to accept your *parole*.

*The Bookman*, 1914.

# THE REAL STANLEY HOUGHTON

## I

One naturally turns to the three volumes containing the *Collected Works of Stanley Houghton* for the purpose of discovering the plays which they cannot possibly enclose. What would Houghton have done next? Where was he heading? Granted another five years of life (which would yet have left him another five younger than Mr. Bennett was when he wrote his *Old Wives' Tale*), what kind of work would his have been then? All who knew him knew that he was still developing furiously. "He developed as far in six months of London and Paris as in six years of Manchester," says his friend and editor, Mr. Harold Brighouse. "To the end he was, in his own judgment, still the industrious apprentice with his maturer work to come." Instead of accepting success as a signal that he had "found himself" at last, he thankfully seized it as a means for really making that discovery. He used it as a key to open a door that gave him room, for the first time, to live at the full pitch of his capacity and desires. So that all the bright scenes in these three books, so skilfully set, inevitably seem to us to-day to be merely a succession of ante-chambers leading excitingly to some ultimate hall whose shape and size we have to guess from their gradually changing construction. And, given so much of a man's work, it surely ought to be possible, by the aid of some imaginative rule of three,

to predict the unwritten next page. Sort these plays into their written order, link their lines of development—continue those lines into the emptiness—measure the figure they map out—and manifestly there you are! It is at any rate a tempting experiment for criticism to try. Suppose we have courage and make it.

II

It may be said at once that it requires courage to carry through. The lines to be ruled will leap like lances at opinion, they will shatter the approved impression of Houghton's powers; you will be hurried, as the horoscope takes shape beneath your hands, into all the embarrassments and conspicuousness of heresy. The official feeling about Houghton is that he was, first of all, an audacious young rebel, a ruthless Lancashire Ibsen, laying human nature bare with a merciless realism; and secondly, that he was the born, perfect playwright. Mr. William Archer called him an Ibsen with the poetry left out; "his technique is superior to Pinero's," said Mr. Baugham; Mr. J. T. Grein heard tocsins sounding when he watched *Hindle Wakes*—"It heralds the movement of the future," he cried—it would help to determine "the Battle of the sexes"; *The Younger Generation* was received as a rebel manifesto. Well, the conviction forced upon you, if you telescope these scenes and then peer down them to discover what their next extension would have been, is that Houghton was not a rebel, not a realist, not a playwright; that on the contrary he was trustful, romantic, and shy—a dreamer by temperament, submissive in his methods, a respectful student of precedent and precept; that it was this very docility and idealism that led him to the stage and clamped him in a medium that misfitted him; that far from being a born playwright, he pined there like

a prisoner, unconsciously strangled by an unsuitable technique; and that when his good conduct and submissiveness won him extra liberty, when success gave independence and self-knowledge, his first independent impulse was to tear off the mask of playwright and mould another, in a different medium, subtler, softer. It was sheer docility, nothing else, that made him seem a rebel. His "realism" was to him a boy's romance. In another five years his fame would have rested not upon plays but on novels. The inferiority of the work that followed *Hindle Wakes* has been regarded as a symptom of slackening power. It was really a sign of exactly the reverse: their vitality was lessened because their author had grown out of them. He died too soon for his reputation, not too late. Death caught him just as he was beginning his real life.

The process, as one sees it now, was this. The contents of these three volumes fall naturally into four sections, each sliding out of the last. Let us examine them in turn. Houghton in the first place, was a pure provincial; his home was in a suburb of Manchester. That was both his great good fortune and his bad. As the reader will already have gathered, from my impressions of Mr. Bennett and Mr. Shaw, I am a firm believer in the privilege, to an artist, of provincialism. It teaches him proportion and perspective, it teaches him humility, it persuades him, above everything, to that wordless belief in something finer than he has ever experienced, some splendid possibility in life, which is absolutely necessary in the absence of some more mystic faith to any who would observe the masked miracle of human nature with accuracy. Every writer, eventually, has to come to London; but if he comes to it from afar he sees it, first of all, stretched colossally to scale against the sky; he sees it massed triumphantly, a royal city of romance

towering tremendously above the levels of his shires; and whilst he knows, as none born in it can, the real relation which it bears to the wide base, the trees of Lebanon that support the staggering rows, he also accepts it as a symbol of the sacred power and pride of men, a glittering proof of the greatness of his kind. He may grow familiar enough with London after entering her gates, grow sick to the soul of her detailed dirt and stupidities; but the memory of that first, massed, impersonal vision never quite fades from his mind. It stamps it with a stupendous standard of achievement. It makes him, for all his life, both emulous and humble—keen to be adequate, but aware that adequacy is a gigantic thing. Above everything it gives him that belief in life's lordliness which must be possessed by all who want to paint common men. He is a man who has seen a vision and his sight is the clearer. He is aware of the wonders of existence. He is alive with the optimism of art.

Stanley Houghton, born in Lancashire, had both this vision and this faith, and they helped him to succeed as he did—he triumphed over London because he held it in awe. But he also suffered for this simplicity. It postponed his true prime. Provincialism enriched his capacity for understanding other people; but it limited his knowledge of himself. We have a habit of assuming that an artist's earliest work, being his most artless, is the most likely to betray his native instincts; and given conditions of some completeness, with a full freedom of choice, it is possible that the naïve admission of elective models which it shows will form a guide to his natural preferences and affinities. Young Chesterton, in Kensington, dabbling at the Slade, did not take long to discover his true bent; all the arts, with specimen artists, were spread before him, on approval; he could try them all within a year and

make his choice. But young Houghton in his suburb! What chance of choice had he? Those who know Mancastrian suburbs will admit the range was small. Those who do not can judge from *The Younger Generation.* Chapel debating societies—amateur theatricals—scales and exercises—peonies on plaques—the surplus energies of a community devoting all its genius to miracles of mechanism, does not go very much further in the way of desultory creativeness than this. It is very natural, it is perhaps even inevitable. It is part of the specialization that produces London. Houghton, hungering vaguely for romance, did the best that he could. He "went in" for amateur theatricals.

It was in this blindfolded fashion, haphazard as a key struck in the dark, that the first phase of Houghton's work was determined. When he left school, Mr. Brighouse tells us, he vaguely hoped to become "a writer." What more natural, more tempting, than to indulge this ambition by concocting imitation parlour plays, the traditional article, for production by himself and his friends? He wrote a number, we are told—"little comic operas and farces" and drawing-room melodramas with the good old-fashioned titles—*The Blue Phial, After Naseby, The Last Shot.* They were probably exactly like all other parlour plays—that was, indeed, the idea. They were simply the work of a man engaged in rigging up an evening's entertainment, and enjoying himself hugely over the job. Even the first plays reprinted in his *Collected Works—Independent Means* (written in 1908) and *Marriages in the Making* (1909) are obviously written in the spirit one writes a Christmas-party charade. There is hardly a pretence of real observation; they are deliberately theatrical, unaffectedly artificial—and it is this naïf knowingness that chiefly constitutes their charm. These plays *were* plays to Houghton; he had no idea of taking himself seriously;

the whole joke was that he was not a real dramatist. It was immense fun to be doing the whole thing himself, pulling off all the old tricks, the approved coups and curtains, piling up the glooms gleefully, streaking in the fat sentiment, watching all the fascinating pulleys and levers of stageland responding as dutifully and solemnly to his touch as if he was a genuine playwright. Even at the age of five-and-twenty and though still a suburban, Houghton, we may be sure, knew perfectly well that people in real life don't have touching conversations like this :—

SIDNEY. I say things without reflecting enough. But you know I didn't mean to hurt you—mother. May I call you mother now ?

MRS. FORSYTH. I hope you will, dear, and I hope that I shall be able to take the place of the mother you have lost.

SIDNEY. If I can only be good enough to be your daughter. (*Sits on the arm of Mrs. Forsyth's chair, and slips her arm about neck.*)

MRS. FORSYTH (*stroking her hand*). I haven't any fear of that.

People don't do things like that in drawing-rooms —but they always did in drawing-room melodramas ; and when Sidney cooed "Mo-ther" so creamily she was behaving like a true daughter of the stage. Houghton showed his knowledge of human nature, in fact, by misrepresenting it. These plays were the result of a close study of character—but not of the characters they contain. His gifts of insight and observation were being used to estimate sympathetically the attitude and expectations of his little private "house." He had not the smallest intention of holding the mirror up to nature. But his genius made it impossible for him to write even a claptrap comedietta without turning it into a perfect reflection of his audience, a faithful response to their senses, simple, artless, humorous. He gave them exactly what they

wanted, provided all the proper thrills. He was a realist only in the sense that he thoroughly realized the situation.

That was why his suburban drawing-room expanded suddenly into the staggering proportions of a full-sized civic theatre, clamorous with applause. Miss Horniman had established her Repertory Theatre in Manchester; there was an excited demand for a local playwright; Houghton was hurried forward. *Independent Means* was seized and staged. Anybody who knows Lancashire will guess what would happen next; those who do not could learn from *Hindle Wakes*. There was a moment of deep thought, of silent rumination—and then Houghton leant forward swiftly, touched this and that with quickening hands, and instantly, as by a trick of magic, his auditorium swelled again—and there he was a famous dramatist, taking his first triumphant call before the curtain of a crashing West-End house.

## III

This part of the process is probably the most interesting of all; it is worth explaining how the tremendous trick was done. What London expresses an admiration for to-day, Lancashire will provide to-morrow. The first of Houghton's plays to be performed in Manchester—the plays which form the first section of those reprinted in his *Works*—were really only private theatricals done in public. Realizing that perfectly, he resolved to make good. Who were our least suburban playwrights? Criticism (most uncompromising in Manchester just then) solemnly certified the incalculable and unquestionable superiority of St. John Hankin, Barker, Wilde, and Bernard Shaw. Houghton bought their books and studied them steadfastly, with splendid, solemn thoroughness of provin-

cialism; and then "dared" himself to do the same sort of thing. And he rose to the challenge wonderfully. The plays which compose his second period—*Partners, The Fifth Commandment, Fancy Free*—are just a series of deft impersonations. Just as sedulously as he had studied suburban audiences for his first efforts, he now studies superurban dramatists. He learned to do the Hankin drawl to perfection. He could supply an absolutely reliable Shaw waiter:—

SIR ISAAC. Do you mean to say you have been listening to our conversation, Francis?

WAITER. Whilst I am serving tea, sir, it is almost impossible to avoid hearing what is said on this side of the screen. That is one of the disadvantages of hotel life, for the conversation of the visitors is usually very tedious, I find. But you do not need to be alarmed, sir. I will undertake that whatever you say shall go no further.

SIR I. But really, my dear, you must be more careful in future. It is hardly fair to cause Francis any inconvenience.

WAITER. Not at all, sir. Lady Grundy's conversation often gives me the greatest pleasure, I assure you. Her views on current morality are entirely admirable, if I may say so. I often wish my own wife were more like her. A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband.

SIR I. Her price is certainly far above rubies, Francis, as you will find out if ever you are concerned in an action for slander.

WAITER (*smiling indulgently*). Very good, sir; very good indeed. . . . I have never had the experience of being defendant in a slander action; though I have been the co-respondent in a divorce case.

LADY GRUNDY. And what did your wife say when she found that you were co-respondent in a divorce case?

WAITER. She was not in a position to say anything, my lady. She was respondent in the same case.

Or he would run Wilde for a change:—

LADY GRUNDY. Personally, I find bridge a most fatiguing game.

OLIVER. You take it so seriously, Lady Grundy. I do not think games were intended to be played seriously.

LADY G. But, my dear Mr. Walmsley, after all we must be serious about something. I cannot think that we were intended to live only for pleasure. And games are the only things you can get people to be serious about nowadays. All the important matters in life they treat so lightly; such as marriage, for instance.

OLIVER. Perhaps that is because people are beginning to look upon marriage as a sort of game too.

LADY G. Now, Mr. Walmsley, if you talk so cynically I shall begin to suspect that you are married yourself. I notice that most of the cynics are married men.

OLIVER. Sir Isaac is not a cynic, is he?

LADY G. It is because Sir Isaac is married to me that he is not a cynic.

OLIVER. How true that must be.

LADY G. Now you are flattering me, and you expect me to flatter you in return; but I shall not.

OLIVER. I am disappointed. Flattery is the sincerest form of imitation.

And since all this was the sincerest form of imitation, it was quite devoid of self-flattery. These mimicries were never unconscious; they no more prove Houghton invertebrate than a man's morning Müller exercises show him to be a weakling. They were deliberate feats undertaken with the definite purpose of testing his strength by the stiffest contemporary standards and of supplying his native defects. And the discipline did him good. Whatever else Shaw, Wilde, and Hankin may be—however wildly inappropriate as models for a modest soul like Houghton—they are at least all supreme masters of dialogue; and so, when Houghton returned to the provincial middle-class material which he had already used amateur-theatrically in *The Dear Departed*, he managed to give it (in *The Younger Generation* and *Hindle Wakes*—the plays which compose his third period) a constant alertness and nervous quickness

which thrill the entire tissue with at least the surface quality of life. London (simple old London!) never suspected this, of course—London hailed both these plays as autochthonous products, an unpolished provincial's brutal picture of the provinces; but in reality both owe their effectiveness to supremely sophisticated dexterities—to the artifices of such eminent Cockneys as the authors of *Man and Superman*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Return of the Prodigal*.

JEFFCOTE. You don't even know who she is yet.

MRS. JEFF. Whoever she is, if she's not above going away for the week-end with a man, she can't be fit to marry our son.

JEFF. Not even when our son's the man she's been away with?

MRS. JEFF. That has nothing to do with the case. It is evident that she is a girl with absolutely no principles.

JEFF. Dash it all! At that rate some folk might say that Alan's not fit to marry her because of what he's done.

MR. KENNION (*gravely*). I think the English way is best, Tom.

TOM. Yes: and you think old England's the finest country in the world; and that Salchester, dirty old Salchester, is the most beautiful city in England: and that the chapel's the noblest institution in Salchester.

MR. K. (*very seriously*). Well, Tom, if I do——

TOM (*heartily*). Don't apologize for it. That's the spirit that has made England what it is.

MR. K. (*pleased*). Do you really think so?

TOM (*seriously*). I do. Thank God I haven't got it!

This is simply the whimsical humour of Hankin, the nonchalant neatness of Wilde, carefully translated into vernacular.

There is a good deal of Bennett in them too; and just one small dab of Synge-song ("*They call it Daisy Bank because of the daisies in the meadows. All the side of the brow falling away towards the river was thick with them. Thick dotted it was like the*

*stars in the sky of a clear night*"). But Hankin, Wilde, and Shaw are the chief assistants. These were the fastidious cooks Houghton employed to help him to create the consommé which was shortly to be hailed as genuine Lancashire brose !

IV

Maybe Manchester knew better—Mr. Brighouse seems to say so (with perhaps a certain severity). But indeed Manchester played her own dubious part; it is to the consideration of her influence that we now come. For we have traversed three of the ante-chambers, and the next is the crucial one into which Houghton stepped when success set him free. It is represented in these books by a series of *Manchester Guardian* back-pagers, little semi-narrative *choses vues*, and by the first six chapters of an unfinished novel, *Life*—this being the book he was working on in Paris, the last piece of work beneath his hand ("I am quite absorbed in it, and work at it as I haven't done at anything since *Hindle Wakes*"). The change of key is profound. It is true that he is still using models—the influence of George Moore, for instance, is very marked—of George Moore *via* Arnold Bennett perhaps in the novel, of George Moore with a touch of Max—the pensive, exquisite Max of *Yet Again*—in such a little crepuscular prose-impression as *The Teashop*:—

> It does not look quite like a teashop outside ; but how attractive is the great heap of hollow yellow cakes, the colour of ripe corn, piled unevenly in the right-hand window, and when you go inside you do, indeed, find that tea may be had in the back part of the shop, a place imperfectly screened by a wide curtain composed of threaded beads and reeds.

But you feel that the choice, instead of being now the carefully considered one of the aspirant, is the

instinctive selection of a man reaching eagerly for the instrument best adapted to express the things he really wants to say. Hitherto, as we have seen, he has been rather rushed into his methods; circumstances hustled him into certain styles. Now, for the first time, he is able to defy circumstance; he is selecting to please himself, and with a completer consciousness than ever before of all the available alternatives. It is surely very significant that he should turn at once to prose fiction. And even more significant that the moods he now expresses, the interests to be confessed and indulged, should be moods and interests totally different from those which are reflected in the plays. There is but little beauty in his plays. There is a great deal of beauty here—not verbal beauty only, silken phrases and soft refrains, but a charming tenderness of touch in dealing with mortal relationships, a constant, chivalrous, engrossed and diffident care for fine discriminations and delicate truths. And the prose is everywhere eager to dwell on what, in one of his own earlier articles, he had called the "beautiful strangeness" of life.

Of these little prose-impressions the more perfect all deal with the effort of some pale prisoned character, a crushed clerk or an incomplete oldster, to escape from his back-water, if only for an instant, and feel, for once, the full exciting surge of coarse existence. *The Time of His Life*, *Revolt of Mr. Reddy*, *Out of Season*, all repeat this idea of a sudden awakening to the wonder of reality; *Life* itself was to tell of a girl's dash towards Life. Here is the opening paragraph of another sketch, *Fritz's*, ostensibly only a circumstantial street-scene, where the same delighted sense of ordinary life as a sort of fairy-tale, a fairy-tale he had just learned to read, keeps freshening and fascinating his pen:—

The tramcars go swinging down the street as regular as Fate, and in their wake the mob. In the gutter the newsboy cries aloud, and the cheap-jack publishes his wares in the doorway. You, too, who are of the mob, pass along with the rest of your kind. You do not hear the racket because you have heard it so often, nor do you look to right or left, because you have seen a thousand times all that there is to be seen. You have seen, for instance, but have not noticed, that narrow tunnel burrowing its way between a couple of shops with the air of merely serving back premises ; or if you have noticed it you have suspected it, probably, of providing furtive access to some lurking public-house, too disreputable to venture into the open. But the tunnel is a thoroughfare. Penetrate it far enough, and you find yourself, unaccountably, in a nook amongst the houses, sudden as a clearing in a jungle. Something of the jungle quiet hangs over the tiny square. The roar of the neighbouring traffic is dulled and softened to the music of distant surf. Steep buildings rise like cliffs all above this dim pool of silence, shutting out the common noises of the town—shutting out the sunlight, too, save at high noon in summer.

## V

There is no escaping the inference. It was the romance of the stage that had mainly attracted Houghton at first; he had now begun to turn towards the romance of real life. His interest had shifted from the people sitting inside the theatre to the humanity walking outside it; and in order to express these new perceptions, broader visions, he had to discard the special technique of the stage. He found it—or at any rate he found the special form of it he had cast—too fixed and rigid for these finer, fuller registrations. The characterization in *Hindle Wakes* is faithful so far as it goes—but it was not allowed to go very far, very deep; for the effects which Houghton knew counted most on the stage, the sort of construction he perfected, demanded a material of broad relationships and simplified emotions, and a lack of subtleties and semitones. Perhaps, indeed, the

stage never is the place for subtlety and semitones. Mr. Arnold Bennett says so, and Mr. Bennett has a way of being right. "If the dramatist attempts to go beyond a certain very mild degree of subtlety he is merely wasting his time; what passes for subtle on the stage would have a very obvious air as a novel." Houghton's novel opens heavily, but it soon gathers pace, and before the end of the first fragment of six swiftly written chapters it is reproducing life more intimately, honourably, and discriminatingly than he was able to in any of his plays. He is still dealing with Lancashire—but he is dealing with it more finely—which is not at all necessarily the same thing as making it seem finer. He was cutting closer, amassing more minutely, mixing his ingredients in finer proportions, and the result would probably have been a representation of vigour, of coarseness, of jannock and all the rest of the North country virtues, as much more lifelike than *Hindle Wakes* as *Hindle Wakes* is more veracious than *Independent Means.*

So that we are compelled to sum up in this way: the moment Houghton discarded the specialized technique which his resolve to do first-rate theatre work had thrust upon him, he began to write with a notable increase of originality and sincerity—in order to speak with his own voice he had to cease using the lips of marionettes and actors. It was a purely romantic impulse that made him write plays to begin with—it was romance, that is to say, that made him a "realist"; and beneath all the apparent sophistication and cynicism of his work there always lay concealed this longing for "a beautiful strangeness." He was not a "dramatist of ideas"—he was simply a man of ideals. He was not an intellectual rebel nor a dogmatist. He was wistful and eager,

romantically shy, with—deepest of all perhaps—a beautiful humility. In spite of his cleft chin and Cæsarean nose, there was always about his physical appearance something a little fugitive and imploring; an expression of entreaty always lurked in his eyes. Chin and nose and *Hindle Wakes* together all deceived even Max—his caricature, it will be remembered, represents Houghton stalking impassively, with a cold Roman assurance, into a ring of reduced Cockney dramatists, all looking very under-nourished in his presence. But this idea of the cocksure provincial is just as wrong in his case as it is in Mr. Arnold Bennett's. What distinguishes them both is the provincial's precious gift of wonder, his way of approaching life in a spirit of worship and credulity. That is why they take it by storm. For this belief in something better than they have ever known themselves—something to be found, perhaps, in London or in Paris—constantly stimulates them on the one hand to put all their strength into their work so as to make up for any native disadvantages, and on the other hand it keeps their glances bright with that eagerness and faith without which the essential truth of no single mortal thing can be perceived. Manchester certainly cramped Houghton at the outset by leaving him, unsophisticated, at the mercy of chance ambitions and ideals; but the unsophistication was worth any price. It gave him the poet's faith and faculty, the aspirant's eagerness and humility; it would have carried him—one cannot say how far. It has been complained of him that he "threw in no poetry"—and if by poetry is meant something pastoral and lyrical we may agree that he hadn't the knack of it. But if by a sense of poetry we mean a recognition of the astonishing sweetness and wildness of existence, its incessant fantasy and "beautiful strangeness," we must insist that it was Houghton's main gift. It was

this that made him revel in writing parlour plays, made him write melodrama, made him use thunder in the opening scene of *Hindle Wakes*; and when set free to move candidly about the stage of the world, it is this that would have lifted his representations into truth. "He observed life from the comic-writer's point of view, which is not the poet's. For his art, not the beauty of life, but the absurdities and hypocrisies of daily existence, were the targets of his aim." It is with these words that Mr. Brighouse concludes his loyal and affectionate editorial essay. Probably they perfectly define the work Houghton had already done. They would have had to be exactly reversed to fit the work that was to follow. "Not the absurdities and hypocrisies of daily existence," but the beauty of life was now to be the aim of his art. He observed life no longer from the comic-writer's point of view, but from the poet's. It is strange to remember that it was the very eagerness of the impulse that carried him on his new quest that helped to end it so soon. It would almost seem that he pushed open the wonderful door just too far, and so vanished for ever from our sight.

*Manchester Guardian*, 1914.

## BEAU BEERBOHM

"ZULEIKA DOBSON," by Max Beerbohm, is a novel for the worthy. Like it—and you are proved civilized. Dote on and adorate it—sleep with it beside your pillow—vow to sheathe it in vellum, slenderly tooled, and ensconce it on that supreme shelf where your copy of "A H . . L . . L . . . ." (its predestined mate) has hitherto lorded it alone, and, no matter what your career may say to the contrary, nor whether other, coarser tests plough you, you may take it that you have passed with honours. But mislike it, even faintly—yawn only once, skip but a single page—or a single word on a page—or even one of the invisible couplings that unite word with word faultlessly throughout, and it must be said that, practically, you do not count. Nor would you deserve to. For one thing, *Zuleika*, though a novel, is actually *written*. A reward as well as a test, it is made in addition by that one fact a noble refutation. It clears our letters of a serious charge—taking all the sting out of that taunt which a certain savage caricaturist, called Max, once let fly at our faithful English fiction. His drawing will be remembered. Gazing blankly at our special line of novelists, each mounted briskly on his little tub, came the ghost of R. L. S., courteously guided by Mr. Edmund Gosse; and "Yes, yes," it was saying as it eyed the heated row, "but where are your Men of Letters?" That drawing will have to be revised now; and in the new edition Mr. Gosse

will cover the masked carper with confusion, will pierce him with his own pencil, by triumphantly turning Stevenson's attention away from the disrespectful portraits and out upon the peering draughtsman himself.

*Zuleika* is written; and what a rare joy it is to see the words on a page of fiction no longer trudging dully across the page like clerks going to work, but streaming like figures in a carnival, each a piece of finished colour, mannered costume, preened dandiacally, and yet all linked together by the hidden music of no tone which the movements of the dance alone betray, and all pelting each other as they dart with perfumed messages full of private meanings. Delicious, too, to find them forming frank conceits: "Her mouth was a mere replica of Cupid's bow, lacquered scarlet and strung with the littlest pearls"; or "the shadows crept out across the lawn, thirsty for dew." Here is a manner so light that even pathetic fallacies chuckle as they flit, and the all-dreaded descriptive passage becomes a pirouette. This of an Oxford noon:—

> Some clock clove with silver the stillness of the morning. Ere came the second stroke, another and nearer clock was striking. And now there were others chiming in. The air was confused with the sweet babel of its many spires, some of them booming deep, measured sequences, some tinkling impatiently and outwitting others which had begun before them. And when this anthem of jealous antiphonies and uneven rhythms had dwindled quite away and fainted in one last solitary note of silver, there started somewhere another sequence; and this almost at its last stroke was interrupted by yet another, which went on to tell the hour of noon in its own way, quite slowly and significantly, as though none knew it.

It is beauty forgetting to be solemn. Or rather it is laughter remembering all the graces: laughter holding both its sides—but as the figures do in a

Watteau minuet. For if the phrases move in a galliard it is because they do form part of a ballet: a ballet set in Oxford—Eights Week for its time—deans, dons, and bedders for its minor coryphees—a ceremonious suicide of every undergraduate for its central scene—and, for its Pavlova, Zuleika herself, owner of those lacquered lips, the Helen who invokes that holocaust of fair young lives, and a follower of that art

> which, more potently than any other, touches in mankind the sense of mystery and stirs the faculty of wonder, the most truly romantic of all the arts—the art of conjuring.

That is the kind of book it is! It bears the same relation to realism that music does to noise or dancing to pedestrian exercise. It is as formal as Mozart and as irresponsible as a fairy-tale; fine literature it is, and yet a lark. Loveliness glides in and out among the revellers, but only as a lure for wit, and the wit is there for wantonness; and indeed it is just when the dance whirls into its most elfin extravagances that the music, keeping pace with it, mounts to its subtlest and purest. It is mockery without a touch of malice; the work of a Puck pretending to be pierrot and only succeeding, like his happy hypocrite, in becoming more humane. It is full of an exquisite raillery, yet you suffer no cathartic pang; not even that spectacle of young lives quenched untimely by love and Isis discomposing you more than the ghosts that glimmer through the hero's halls:—

> There are five ghosts permanently residing in the right wing of the house, two in the left, and eleven in the park. But all are quite noiseless and quite harmless. My servants, when they meet them in the corridors or on the stairs, stand aside to let them pass, thus paying them the respect due to guests of mine; but not even the rawest housemaid ever screams or flees at sight

of them. I, their host, often waylay them and try to commune with them, but always they glide past me; and how gracefully they glide, these ghosts! It is a pleasure to watch them. It is a lesson in deportment.

And let not the reader, that grand word "lesson" taking him back to a sense of the proprieties, allow its knell to shatter *Zuleika* as though it were nothing but bric-à-brac. Dandiacal enough, the book has yet a human heart. The danger, of course, was that the artifice would get vitiated and collapse. Can you make a meal of *marrons glacés*? Or sit out a three-hour ballet? That Mr. Beerbohm persuades you to these excesses is due in part to his exhaustless series of devices for freshening the atmosphere. Clio and Socrates are among them, and Mrs. Annie Swan, and a French maid called Melisande (engaged to a waiter in the Café Tourtel, called, of course, Pelleas), and a bottle of Cold Mixture and a Rhodes Scholar. Mr. Beerbohm is an even better juggler than Zuleika. Just as she and Cinquevalli and such great artists will introduce a second artifice, their "business," to heighten the effect of the first, and then a third, that of the stupid assistant, to sustain the second, so Mr. Beerbohm unpockets missile after coloured missile and tosses them incessantly up to keep the first iridescent fancy hovering excitingly in mid-air.

That is half his secret; but the other, and the bigger, is the fact that it is all based on a strict study of natural laws. The bubble is the same shape as the earth; and the reflections that gleam there are curiously like the delicate distortions we call truth. "Your way of speech has what is called the literary flavour," says the Duke to Zuleika. "Ah, yes," she says, "that is an unfortunate trick I caught from a writer, a Mr. Beerbohm, who once sat next to me at dinner. But my experience of life is drawn from life itself." So is the book's behind its literary flavour.

The figure may look like *bisque*, but the pedestal is rock; and good old laws, observed austerely, run up through the ribands and the garlands and the tinted coquetries to sustain the poised caprice. For this reason let that presumptuous talk about unworthiness be taken as not written. It traduces what it tries to praise. For the book is one of those that make their readers worthy willy-nilly. You may not put it down feeling that the world is in a deuce of a state and that you will certainly go slumming to-morrow. But by some sort of involuntary mimicry your tact for the niceties is quickened. It holds the mirror up to Nature in the only sensible fashion—as a modiste does, that is to say, to her customer, or Melisande to her mistress. Like its ghosts, it is "a lesson in deportment."

*Manchester Guardian*, 1911.

## THE GUILT OF MR. CHESTERTON

"THE criminal is the creative artist; the detective only the critic," mourns Valentin, chief of the Paris police, on the ninth page of this blood-red fairy-book.[1] There's a nasty implication in the thought, perhaps—yet it isn't mere professional resentment that makes one sternly retort that *The Innocence of Father Brown* fairly proves the guilt of Mr. Chesterton. He has been accused of many crimes by our literary Valentins—of undue flippancy, of undue earnestness, of a proneness to platitude, of a weakness for paradox; but perhaps the true charge against him, underlying all these, is that he is too big for his books. That, on the face of it, might not seem much more culpable than palming off sovereigns for shillings—and, indeed, there are extenuating circumstances. For the first four or five of these dozen "detective" tales are really simply goluptious; not since the brave old days of Notting Hill, when Auberon Quin gravely stood on his head in sight of his loyal subjects, have we had such a farrago of magnificent nonsense. *The Blue Cross*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Queer Feet*, *The Flying Stars*—their names alone are enough to set the blood simmering as it used to do on Boxing Nights, when pantomimes were pantomimes still; and the tales themselves beat their titles as easily as the harlequinade did the simpering ballets. The centre of

[1] *The Innocence of Father Brown*. By G. K. Chesterton (Cassell).

each is some madcap, incredible crime, worked out with a lunatic exactness and intricacy, and then hidden cunningly away in the midst of conspicuously meek and mild accessories—among sweetshops in Camden Town, placid villas in Putney, policemen and postmen and matter-of-fact porters. This done—solution safe, and relying on his own ready wit to bring the wildest irrelevance to heel—"G. K. C." fairly lets himself go. Round we are rattled, pelted with puns and wild poetry, at the heels of little moon-faced Father Brown, till at length in some blind alley, with reason on the verge of revolt, the baffling eye of the problem blandly opens and executes a solemn wink. And the effect of fantasy is famously heightened, just as it is in a harlequinade, by the vivid realism of the figures and scenes. Mr. Chesterton has the poet's gift for seeing the most commonplace things—moons or men's faces, hills, street-lamps, and houses—with a startling freshness and suddenness, as though they had been but that instant made; and since epithet and object leap into his mind together—since he has, undeniably, the power of seizing the one golden word and planking it down with a rollicking bang—the old familiar places past which the rout pours shed their old shabbiness wondrously, shine out with the sudden significance of places washed by a dawn.

It was a quaint, quiet square, very typical of London, full of an accidental stillness. The tall, flat houses round looked at once prosperous and uninhabited; the square of shrubbery in the centre looked as deserted as a green Pacific islet. One of the four sides was much higher than the rest, like a dais; and the line of this side was broken by one of London's admirable accidents—a restaurant that looked as if it had strayed from Soho. It was an unreasonably attractive object, with dwarf plants in pots and long striped blinds of lemon-yellow and white. It stood specially high above the street, and in the usual patchwork way of London, a flight of steps from the street ran up to meet the front door almost as a fire-escape might run up to a first-floor window.

It is true, no doubt, that some of these qualities will simply exasperate the downright democrats whom Mr. Chesterton wants specially to cheer, and that they will tickle the palates of precisely the people whom in his heartiness he affects to despise. True, too, perhaps, that we have here a repetition of the great Notting Hill blunder. Adam Wayne wanted to prove modern London romantic, but adopted the curiously cumbrous and expensive process of painting its buildings with hot blood. Mr. Chesterton, too, would drive home to us the unconquerable queerness of things—the picturesqueness of sweetshops and suburbs —but tries to do it by cramming daft fairy-tale crimes into the middle of the unregarded streets. Somehow, he will *not* realize that his fingers flourish a weapon far more effective in such affairs than Wayne's big sword; that his cool picture of that "quaint, quiet square" brings out all its elfin magic like a spell; that a pantomime troupe pouring into it simply turns it back into a bit of stage scenery.

But these are little errors and ironies that the reader, carried away by the pantomime, will not allow to sadden him unduly. It is when he is half-way through the book that he becomes aware of a sudden change—a change so sinister that he may very well wonder whether the madness has not mounted to his head. He gets the dark, indescribable sensation of being in the presence of something actually evil. All this violence and vividness become horribly akin to the insane lucidity of nightmare. Yet, queerly, as he perceives on reflection, this change coincides with another which seems a pure triumph of virtue. Flambeau, the great criminal, the author of the fantastic crimes he has been tracking hitherto, suddenly repents; and Father Brown is at liberty to roam more largely about the world, holding Flambeau by the hand, a brand snatched from the burning, like a little

dumpy Dante tripping beside a big blond Virgil. But instead of the light from this Flambeau falling on sins of an ever-increasing freshness and fantasy—outrages so utterly outrageous that we laugh at them as at the red-hot pokers and battered policemen of pantomime—we pass into places where things unspeakable prowl and spawn, as though we were indeed winding down the circles of some hell. "Mud-stains, blood-stains." There are dipsomaniacs and blotched paramours; the lost faces of idiots leer out of the darkness, blind women are murdered, there are new and more fearful forms of fratricide; and in this heavy atmosphere of horror quiet details swell and twist like things seen in an ill dream. The physical uglinesses are bad enough—Norman Bohun's smashed head "a hideous splash like a star of blackness and blood." But far more dreadful is the way some peaceful secondary thing—a group of trees, or a distant passer-by, or a quiet country church—will suddenly writhe out of its place and rush into the foreground, waxing horribly, like a face in a fever, as though struggling to express something too monstrous for speech:—

> The village church was hewn out of ancient and silent stone, bearded with fungoids and stained with the nests of birds. And yet, when they saw it from below, it sprang like a fountain at the stars; and when they saw it, as now, from above, it poured like a cataract into a voiceless pit. For these two men on the tower were left alone with the most terrible aspect of Gothic; the monstrous foreshortening and disproportion, the dizzy perspectives, the glimpses of great things small and small things great; a topsy-turvydom of stone in mid-air. A carved bird or beast at a corner seemed like some vast walking or flying dragon wasting the pastures and villages below. The whole atmosphere was dizzy and dangerous, as if men were upheld in air on the gyrating wings of colossal genii; and the whole of the old church seemed to sit upon the sunlit country like a cloudburst.

It is a violence that seems somehow dæmonic. It is a vividness like the unclean clarity that comes with drugs. It is like moving in a world of gargoyles, among the devils on Notre Dame. Now the change may be merely due to sudden spurts of real energy—Mr. Chesterton's true gifts, tired of tomfoolery, bursting out into mutinous roars. Or there may be something in it of that kind of devil-worship, that fascinated insistence on evil, which goes along with some fiery sorts of religion. Or, again, it may be only the result of lashing an invention tired of its nice new game. These are matters for the moralists. But the technical crime, which is all a mere Valentin may deal with, is in any case the same; and it is that technical transgression which produces this atmosphere of evil, this sense of unlawful powers. It is the evil of ugliness, of deformity—and the deformity is fundamentally due to the disparity between energy and outlet. It is this inadequacy that drives the perspectives mad and fills the trees with a frightening energy—hints at solemn significance where there is none and darkens impossible crimes till they swell into symbols of Sin. "Pooh!" cries Mr. Chesterton cheerily. "You are too easily terrified nowadays. The men who carved gargoyles did it out of jollity, sitting in the sun and drinking ale like brothers." Maybe; but at least they did it to lighten an ancient faith, not to give weight to a joke. That, indeed, was the true superiority of the Middle Ages: they did give their dreamers and carvers a task even bigger than their power. And even later on, with cathedrals all cut and dried, lyrics could still be complemented with campaigns—or, better still, the blood and the ink could be blended by writing books which relied on men's living bodies as much as they did on dead words. Born too late for campaigns, Mr. Chesterton has to try to satisfy the militant side of

him by letting out in polemical battles that are only a little less unreal than villanelles. Whilst lacking a public as eager as the Elizabethan for blank verse and drama, he tries to pack his energies into tushery like this. Perhaps it isn't such an innocent thing to give away sovereigns for shillings. There is such a thing as degrading the currency. Something might surely be said about images and superscriptions. Nay, if one only had the eloquence it is little Father Brown we would paraphrase, pinning our quarry with the very appeal which he used to convert Flambeau :—

"Oh, yes," said his meek voice in the garden, as he looked up at the great, easy figure making its glittering escape. "I know you not only forced the pantomime but put it to a double use. You had the clever notion of hiding the real jewels in a blaze of false stage jewellery. But now I want you to give up this life. There is still youth and honour and humour in you ; don't fancy they will last at that trade. Men may keep a sort of level of good, but no man has ever been able to keep on one level of badness. That road goes down and down. I know the woods look very free behind you, Flambeau ; I know that in a flash you could melt into them like a monkey. But some day you will be an old grey monkey, Flambeau. You will sit up in your free forest cold at heart and close to death, and the tree-tops will be very bare."

And, instead? Well, we suppose it is true that we can never hope to see Mr. Chesterton clinging to the face of some cathedral cheerily chiselling away ; and the vision of him, booted and spurred, leading his men at the charge is doubtless also doomed to remain just a figure in a dream. And to speak of poetic dramas is also perhaps too optimistic ; Mr. Trench leaving the Haymarket and all. But there is one fine form of art —a little ailing just now, it is true, but immensely capable of revitalization—which would give him just the scope he requires. It calls for pageantry, poetry, and puns with an equal distinctness : it could both

tower up into great symbols and sprawl into boisterous jokes; it ought to be as merry as a Christmas party, and it is a true child of the grim old moralities. . . . Exactly! Come down, O Chesterton, from yonder madcap height, and write us—the perfect pantomime.

*Manchester Guardian*, 1911.

# THE YELLOW PATCH

## A CHRONICLE OF MR. JOHN MASEFIELD

### I

THIS Chronicle is being written (or at any rate begun) on the top of a hill—on one of those skulls of scalped rock, abrupt faces of stone, that start up in the north to look south, over England, over the dinted, tinted, patterned spread of turf and town;—and though it was only accident that brought me here, yet (like all accidentals, really, if one had only luck and sense to live sincerely) the place has an absolute aptness—for it is up to just such a peak that such a Chronicle ought to swing the imagination of the reader—giving him a glimpse of the kingdoms of poetry in a few moments of time: the gleaming fields, the fresh allotments, the little hurrying, eager figures; the swathe of colour twisting and biting into the moorland beyond; the threads of traffic that suck its brightness to the cities. Such a Chronicle ought to seek to do this not simply for the sake of giving a reader the hang of the whole thing, of showing him how the fields fit and interlock; but rather for the purpose of bringing out the brisk diversities and making him realize the poets as a lot of independent, mortal units. He ought to see them as specific specks, as mere hard-working humans; we want immensely to flatten out Parnassus. For Poetry has been looked up to far too long; it is time the reader looked down on it: nothing is doing

its dignity more damage than the palsying superstition that it is something excessively sublime. The reader picks out his prose-men, he is familiar with philosophers; but the moment he mentions verse he remembers the proprieties: up go his eyes and down droops his voice; and, from what is no doubt just a nice, natural desire to do nothing offensive to refinement, he invariably speaks of the specially simple, jolly, frank, and friendly souls who make it as though they were a race of wilted priests. Whereas, in reality, of course, they are, of all writers, exactly the men whom it is most needful to see as human beings: for, of all forms of writing, theirs is the most personal, intimate, instinctive—poetry being, after all, simply essence of utterance—speech with the artifice left out. Doubly wrong, therefore, this mock-reverence; bad for readers and writers, breeding an unfamiliarity which is the worst sort of contempt; and one of our first tasks ought to be its destruction. Let us preach a gay impiety—insist that songs are meant for singing—declare that the only certain sacrilege is awe. And perhaps one of the soundest ways of doing that would be to show the men among their books, make a series of birds'-eye-views of verse that shall be so many scenes of human effort, with living figures, very mortal, very practical and muddy, engrossed in the grubby, glorious work of growing flowers.

And, as it happens, if but the right Chronicler were here, such an effort might now be made with special justness—for right in the foreground, flashing superbly, easily the top-note of the scene, gleams a patch that not only plucks the reader's sight instantly, and is not only specially quick with human drama, but that is also an absolutely unequalled demonstration of the impertinence of piety, of the irreverence of awe, of the treachery of treating Poetry too devoutly. *The*

*Daffodil Fields* (as this golden plot is called) would in any case indeed have first attention; for it has been the success of the season—crowds flock towards it still—workers from every corner of the colony are still studying it: not only is it more popular than even the new Kipling, it is also far fuller of technical omens than *Auguries*. Everywhere else, as it happens, the main work done has been autumnal: collected poems from A. E., collected poems from Mr. Kipling, collected poems from Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer, a late last sheaf, very delicate—autumn, alas, indeed—from the once so fertile field of Mr. Symons: a general gleaning instead of a breaking of new ground; and in the midst of all this tidiness, these confirmations and composures, this sudden gush of April sings out well. But apart from this mere accident, it has its high importance. It does light up the whole landscape rather oddly. For it is the work of a man intensely typical of our time, a man who stands, to his own hurt, precisely at the point where two traditions—one ascending, one alighting—cross their strains; and to assay this patch of gold is to discover a formula as medicinal as any mountain-view—and one that explains, above everything, why it is that you always write ugliness when you spell Beauty with a capital B.

II

And first, as to its subsoil. For not only do the leaves of a man's early books make a kind of mould from which the later ones spring; but they often tell us the instinctive bent of his mind—their very imitativeness betrays his native ideals. Now Masefield's books form four strata. The top layer is the series of long narrative poems of which *The Daffodil Fields* is the last. Below these is the stretch of prose novels and plays, from *Nan* to *The Street of To-day*. Below

these again is a rich deposit of uncollected criticism, of miscellaneous prose work, and of two volumes (*A Mainsail Haul* and *A Tarpaulin Muster*), which use prose more deliberately, with a self-conscious art—volumes whose contents really were, literally, "essays." And lastly there is the little lode of early verse.

This early verse is very fascinating. Exhumed now, a trifle tarnished, it is like a cache of buried treasure: the two little volumes are caskets full of trinkets made of trinkets, a little hoard of coins and gems, doubloons and precious stones, gathered on clandestine raids and then cunningly re-set.

> Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,
> Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,
> With a cargo of diamonds,
> Emeralds, amethysts,
> Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.

Clandestine—because, buried with them, is a solemn declaration that the purpose of the store was purely altruistic—an italicized, insistent "Consecration."

> *Not of the princes and prelates with periwigged charioteers*
> *Riding triumphantly laurelled to lap the fat of the years—*
> *Rather the scorned—the rejected—the men hemmed in with the spears. . . .*
>
> *The sailor, the stoker of steamers, the man with the clout,*
> *The chantyman bent at the halliards putting a tune to the shout,*
> *The drowsy man at the wheel and the tired look-out.*
>
> *Of these shall my songs be fashioned, my tales be told.*
> *Amen.*

Such a reckless admission of a close acquaintance with Mr. Kipling might seem to argue sincerity, yet it becomes pretty plain, as you turn the verses over, that it was the vividness of the violence that really

attracted him, that he stuck to his bo'suns and buccaneers simply out of love of their loot: that it was out of the topazes and emeralds and gold moidores that his songs were really fashioned. A craving for bright things, small things—things vivid, tense, and shapely—for single stars, single notes, gems, colours like enamels, pictures like the little pictures in missals, and flowers like those that burn on embroideries—that is plainly the human motive here. The best of these verses are those that chime gaily, jewelled in every action, merely pretending to commemorate rude deeds. The worst are those written from a solemn sense of serving beauty. Remembering his sacred office, remembering this is poetry, he seems to gulp back the lilt, heave the Celtic sigh, thin the measure out with dummy notes:—

> The tick of the blood is settling slow, my heart will soon be still,
> And ripe and ready am I for rest in the grave atop of the hill;
> So gather me up and lay me down, for ready and ripe am I
> For the weary vigil with sightless eyes that may not see the sky.

It is pure superstition, of course: the tick isn't "settling slow," at all—it can distinctly be heard beneath the arbitrary drone, a second metre incompletely overlaid. It betrays the truth to us now—that Masefield was no more ready and ripe than a skylark about to ascend, that the real tune in his head was *rum-tiddle-tum*, and that he padded it out with an extra *tum* out of decorum.

So that already it would have been possible to deduce that we had here a man with (*a*) a keen belief in life's kindling picturesqueness, (*b*) a firm resolve to render it worthily, (*c*) an imaginative love for compactness and vividness, for exact, ringing, minute images and sounds, and (*d*) a special power of dwelling

on memories and ideas until he compressed them into small bright cusps and crystals, and of then setting these pellets rhythmically circling in a little silvery setting of sound. But who (*e*) was sometimes prevented, by veneration for his medium, from giving full expression to his eagerness by heating up and hammering down with all his power.

III

And such a man would naturally abandon verse for prose. His instincts would dumbly urge it—for this reverence balked them. And his theory of an elevating vulgarity would provide a prompt excuse —for prose, with its familiarities and universal right of entry, can offer many advantages to an artist bent on being Whitmanly. Theoretically, therefore, *A Mainsail Haul* (the first prose-book—a series of sketches in sailor slang, a sort of simpler *Sailors Three*) may be said to represent an upright attempt to fulfil the terms of that "Consecration" contract more completely. But practically it turned out very different. Instincts are not so easily battened down. Nature will have her way. And this attempt to pay honour to the slang of the sea was unconsciously but a covert way of catching a new literary device, of bringing a new beauty into prose music, and of providing Masefield's mind with a mode of utterance, absolutely new, perfectly fitted to his intensely personal vision. It is one of the most interesting pieces of involuntary self-discovery in recent letters. It is even more impressive than Synge's "call" to Aran. Watch it working in these two examples:—

Now close by where he stood there was a sort of a great store, kept by a Johnny Dago. And if I were to tell you of the things they had in it, I would need nine tongues and an oiled hinge to each of them. But Billy walked into this store, into the space

inside, into like the 'tween decks, for to have a look about him before buying. And there were great bunches of bananas a-ripening against the wall. And sacks of dried raisins, and bags of dried figs, and melon-seeds, and pomegranates enough to sink you. Then there were cotton bales, and calico, and silk of Persia. And rum in puncheons, and bottled ale. And all manner of sweets, and a power of a lot of chemicals.

Then there were lamps and candles, and knives and nutmeg-graters. Bowls there were, painted with twisty-twirls. And flutes from the tombs, and whistles that looked like flower-pots. Also fiddles and beautiful melodeons. There were cages full of parrots, both green and grey ; and white cockatoos on perches a-nodding their red crests ; and Java love-birds a-billing, and parakeets a-screaming, and little kittens for the ships with the rats. And last of all there was a little monkey, chained to a sack of jib-hanks, who sat upon his tail a-grinning.

That is from *A Sailor's Yarn*. Its object will be evident. It would do for the special speech of real sailors, with its repetitions, coils, and verbal hitches, its zest in circumstantial recollection, what Synge had been doing for the speech of the Aran islanders. What it was actually on the track of was a new prose rhythm, an absolutely new prose trick—the very technique the artist needed for himself :—

He helped her up the mount to the top. She stayed there, holding to a tree, facing to the sun with shut eyes. The sun was dipping now. His red disc was cut across by threads of intense gold cloud. The west was orange. Under the west, the landscape's watery grey was luminous. The hills on the horizon were dim butterfly blue. The three pines on Ponton Wood bronzed and sombred. They were captains there, Roman captains, bloody from the conquest. A few faint clouds rose above the colour of the lowest heaven. Water in the valley gleamed steel. Smoke rose above the village. Woods were dim. The world was unreal with haze. Only in this high place the glow unconquered. It flushed the trees still. They reddened under it. Ponton was an ember glowing.

When April was at her loveliest there came a day of rain. The rain filled the little spring at the southern end of the quarry.

The spring bubbled up, stirring the sand-grains with its trembles. It rilled past the rush-clump, past the ooze where the marigolds sucked. With a cluck and colour it slid across a quartz, loitered in bubbles below, bobbed round, curtsied and continued. It rippled away, cleaving through the grasses, in all the perpetual miracle of an April brook. A bramble had fallen across it. It sent it ducking up and down, bright with wet. It drove sodden leaves, and a twig with a lime crust on it, against the bramble. A pool spread, curdling with scum, yeasty near the bramble, like working ale. Then on. Then on. Over a run of pebbles it glugged and tinkled. The leap and collapse of the run of the water on the stone is a continual miracle. The change and interchange, the sudden smooth of the glide, cold, brown, glassy, bursting into bubbles, twinkling into dapples, gold suddenly, instantly blue or brown, a jobble, a plowter, a collapse, always a rush, a hurry, always deliberate, pausing, circling, making up its mind, headlong at last, anon quiet, menacing even, secret.

Those are from *The Street of To-day.* The reader will see what has happened. It is the same tune, the same tempo; and the same sailor's mode of cataloguing, item by item, made to serve the writer's own brain. It is a kind of passionate reporting, a logic of vision. It works minutely, with tiny details; then makes them magnificent by rhythm. The reader's mind progresses strictly, every step a statement, and yet it is roused and uplifted as by rhetoric. The periods rattle like drum-taps. The small bright pictures flash intensely. There is something hypnotic in the recurrent tick and flash. A kind of trance exalts the onlooker, he tastes the cleansing power of vision, he is granted the happiness of illusion perfectly fulfilled.

And this percussive, pointillist, exact and stabbing way of writing is so extraordinarily successful, simply because it excites, summons, and employs at their keenest pitch all Masefield's powers of apprehension. The beat of this music is the very step of his mind. It is the exact oral equivalent of that

optical greed for a bead-like lucidity and brightness which filled his early books with doubloons, gems, moidores. It is Masefield's way of realizing the world, of expressing it to himself. He has to clutch and grip it to make sure of it; he has to resolve life into little pellets and reduce ideas to tense images. The sense of safety these things yield him is the secret of the fascination which all small pellucid things have had for his art; bubbles, eddies, notes of music, script, maps, the ticking of a clock, mouse-scamperings. It is this that dots so many of his pages with a kind of dogma. "Vitality is shown by capacity for thought." "Science is the art of the twentieth century." "Any resolute endurance of life is comforting to the perplexed." They are to be thought of more as diagrams than epigrams. It is his love of particularity that makes him generalize. It is the something neatly gnomish in the result that makes him gnomic. Sentences like these are probably due to a desperate clutch, a kind of nervousness, far more than any desire to be oracular.

For it is perfectly possible that this queer keenness of apprehension is due to a kind of apprehensiveness. That sailor's doting love of solid detail, from which this method was derived, is itself a symptom of a state of dispossession, and it is possible that these sentences owe their determined definition to a pressure made convulsive by uncertainty. But, with the awful inhumanity of reading, we do not let that depress us. For if this is the case, then fear has brought us something that courage lacked the energy to conquer. These short sentences may be written gaspingly, but they reach us like commands. They rap out authoritatively, they kindle, reassure. They are sentences in the court-room sense: they deliver judgment and pass on; and the quick pulse seems the panting beat of splendid swiftness.

Our man, in short, had invented, by a kind of accident, a verbal machine that applied all his energies creatively—using them to stamp a pattern on knowledge, to give reality design, and to mint memories into talismans that gave the rest of us courage, so bright and clear and certain was their form. But it still remained for him to apply it to the brutal boulder of the world. It had worked wonderfully in brief essays, in the romantic studies of *A Tarpaulin Muster*; would it work when he fed into it the unselected stuff of modern life: would this snapping die-stamp sort of technique make a novel?

IV

*Captain Margaret; Multitude and Solitude; The Street of To-day:* these were the successive results of this larger application. Each is better than the last; and though even the third has its weakness, it is reassuring to realize its nature. For the special weakness of the first is half-eradicated in the second; and in the third it is its cure that makes the new one. *Captain Margaret* failed badly when it touched on certain themes. Whenever it dealt with action, with vigour, enterprise, eagerness, this panting prose method was superb. But when it touched anything "poetic"—women, roses, love, ideals—then the old tradition of the Celtic sigh, the hushed accent and the dreamy voice, touched the writer and persuaded him to write in gloves. He parted with his special powers. He became dreamy and the colour faded from his work. For a man must be wide-awake to see visions.

This, then, was his danger—the self-consciously poetic; old, unhappy, far-off things played the deuce with him; and so when news came that he was at work on a novel of modern life, that *Multitude and*

*Solitude* was to be about twentieth-century science, those of us who had watched him eagerly chuckled, sure the trick was done. *Multitude*—it was the very thing; in *The Street of To-day*, with its surge of swift detail, its myriad faces and reverberant beat, his curious genius, with its eagerness, its glorious power of making circumstantial statements simply sing, would get its supreme opportunity. And what happened? Something which we might indeed have foreseen, so often has it fretted modern art. The mere murk and bitterness, rancour and filth, which have always formed a superficial wrapper round reality, a film which the poet has to pierce, clogged up the bright machinery, embittered the machinist, and sent him, by revulsion, off again in the vague. There are noble chapters in both these books; three-fourths of each is superb; but it was, and it always will be, technically impossible for Masefield to write a masterpiece round a hero who sees modern life as a gigantic misery, London as a cancer, its crowds a suppurating rabble. A Shaw, with his love of a fight, with his verbal sentences specially forged to thrust like spears, could use such a hero quite happily —could use, indeed, no other kind, for his creative energy is only kindled by destruction, he can only fiddle when Rome burns. But Masefield's gift is of the rarer, fresher, finer sort, that can only create among felicities. It has to work in detail: and therefore it must always work constructively, for destruction deals with masses, movements; insults are of all things the least pointed. And so, when Roger Naldrett set to work to preach and propagate a hatred of "the weariness and filth of cities," he was really mutinying against his maker. He was cutting down his masts. For Masefield's methods, if they are going to fight to win, must always sail beneath a Jolly Roger.

V

And now the reader sees the human significance of *The Daffodil Fields*—begins to realize that there are battle-fields below them. *The Street of To-day* was spoiled by bitterness; but it was a bitterness due to lack of sympathy; the cure for that lack of sympathy was simply increased human knowledge—the kind of experience that a novelist needs, and wants, and welcomes. Another long modern novel might have brought Masefield into port. But no new long novel came. Instead—*The Everlasting Mercy.* Our man had fallen back into the dangerous precincts of Poetry; he was writing a long tale in verse.

And at first it did seem as though he must have found some protective spell—*The Everlasting Mercy* was never awestruck for one second. The freshness of the medium, the rap of the rhymes, the idea of doing something rather daring, all roused that healthy element of impishness which had saved him once or twice before; and up and down the ratlines of the metre his wits went scampering like schoolboys in a rigging.

By Dead Man's Thorn, while setting wires,
Who should come up but Billy Myers,
A friend of mine, who used to be
As black a sprig of hell as me,
With whom I'd planned, to save encroachin',
Which fields and coverts each should poach in.
Now when he saw me set my snare—
He tells me "Get to hell from there.
This field is mine," he says, "by right;
If you poach here, there'll be a fight.
Out now," he says, "and leave your wire—
It's mine."
*S.K.* "It ain't."
*B.M.* "You put."
*S.K.* "You liar."
*B.M.* "You closhy put."
*S.K.* "You liar."

*B.M.* "This is my field."
*S.K.* "This is my wire."
*B.M.* "I'm ruler here."
*S.K.* "You ain't."
*B.M.* "I am."
*S.K.* "I'll fight you for it."
*B.M.* "Right, by damn."

No mock-piety there!—and in spite of the moral tag, the whole prodigious holocaust—firebells, brick-bats, copper nozzles, Jimmy Jaggard—is simply unregenerate harlequinade. It is because the thing is a harlequinade that it bubbles melody and beauty; it sings just because it is a lark. Sheer excitement, as always, set Masefield's imagination glowing; and the celestial passages granted it are really, technically, the direct reward for Kane's career of horrid crime.

But that could not last. A sense of mischief, of reaction, might supply zest for one such effort—but in the end it was bound to die down; and the moment it did so the old enemy would advance. Poetry would punish him; Poetry would beat him to his knees—and in *The Daffodil Fields* you see her doing it. For that is the dire truth about them: their gold is that of the Yellow Book. It is literary, liturgical; it is strewn with vague symbols; it is the work of a man writing with reverential, half-closed eyes. It has been condemned, indeed, as prosaic. The truth is that it is far too "poetical." It employs "Death's red sickle" and Michael's "manly grace"; "Time crawls" in it and "rumours run"; Mary "trembles like a leaf," turns "cold as a corpse," goes "sick with shame" and "white to the lips." The lines are all stuffed with such relics, old metaphors—once marvellous, but now dirtied by much handling into meaninglessness. And the sense of appropriateness, of tradition, which makes him use these things makes him muffle his own gestures: "*many* a grey-goose"—"*some* grass fields"—"all the rooks"—"adjoining land"—"enormous rings"

—in the whole of *The Everlasting Mercy* you will not see a single phrase as approximate as these—and they are all taken from the opening passage. They are evidence of a vision relaxed. That power of prismatic focusing, upon which all his magic depends, seems to have deserted him drearily; and the loose, irresolute rhymes, the *chatter-water*, *feet-defeat*, *life-is-this—mysteries*, are all symptoms of the same numbness—the result of prostration before a hieratic symbol instead of an excited seizure of the profane, particular fact.

I am generalizing now myself, of course, for my space is almost done; but it isn't captious, hypercritical, to mark these laxities. It takes no cleverness to spot them—they are visible to everybody: the only danger is that they may be ascribed to the wrong cause. They might be put down to indifference—whereas it is just the reverse: it is deference, gravity: it is because Masefield has grown too particular that he has ceased to be particular. For this man's writing, to be powerful, must be metrical in the stricter sense: it must measure, enumerate, be exact; and it is possible that, in order to be numerical in that sense, it must avoid the noble numerousness of verse. It all depends on his ability to conquer this mesmerism, this awful sense of the sublimity of Art. Perhaps the true worshipper must always seem, and feel, profane: his eagerness filling him with a fire impatient of candles; perhaps we have all to put a bit of devil into our work before we can achieve the divine. But, at any rate, Masefield's key to infinity, I am certain, must always be strictly finite. He must cling to hard, determinate outlines if he is to rouse moods that outstrip calculation and emotions as insubstantial as desire. It is only with verses of an absolutely geometrical exactness that he can induce that condition of trance.

*Poetry and Drama*, December 1913.

## SIR W. ROBERTSON NICOLL

I DESIRE to speak to-day[1] of the latest work of a writer who has just been declared, by the readers of a certain magazine (casting their votes into the ballot-box of its columns), "the greatest of all living Scotsmen." My own knowledge of great Scotsmen would have been too limited to allow me to decide how far this claim for "Claudius Clear" (for it was he) is a just one—but it is impossible for any one not to see in this general conviction of his supremacy, this admiration cherished by so many thousands of human beings, a clinching proof of the extraordinary character of his power. Every Thursday, in *The British Weekly*, Sir W. Robertson Nicoll addresses an audience far more numerous, far more responsive, far more eagerly in earnest, than that controlled by any other living critic. He praises a book—and instantly it is popular. He dismisses one, gently—and it dies. He controls the contents of the book-shelves of a thousand homes—they change beneath his fingers like bright keyboards—and every alteration means the modification of a mind. What Claudius Clear reads on Wednesday, half Scotland and much of England will be reading before the end of the week. So that it is plainly a matter of high importance, as well as of immense interest, to consider the quality

[1] In *The Liverpool Courier*, 1913.

of this influence, the secrets of this power, the characteristics of the man and his work.

I

And *A Bookman's Letters*[1] (his new book) enables us to attempt this with special ease—for the volume is made up, for the most part, of the actual *British Weekly* letters, its contents being, "in the main, a selection from some hundreds of similar letters contributed under the general title *The Correspondence of Claudius Clear*, and addressed to a large popular audience interested in books and authors." There are forty-eight papers in all, each from eight to twenty pages long, their subjects stretching from Meredith to Mark Rutherford—and I have read them through from end to end with (I am ashamed to say) a perpetually astonished admiration and delight. "Ashamed"—because I feel the astonishment to be disgraceful—I feel that I ought to have discerned long ago the special qualities I now see lifting these utterances into eminence: it ought not to have been necessary for the type to don deep margins, for the columns to expand in comely pages, before I could realize the best distinctions of the style. One has always, indeed, ardently admired Claudius Clear's critical work: it is quite impossible for any journalist not to have the most enormous respect for its tirelessness and temperance, its readiness and range; for its rare combination of a grasp of curious detail with a capacity for quick and high enthusiasm; its splendid habit of referring all things to certain spiritual standards and yet for evincing all the time a homely humour. But this statelier dress brings out even finer qualities than these—qualities which

[1] *A Bookman's Letters*. By W. Robertson Nicoll.

the more democratic livery disguised—and one learns, with some shamefacedness, that what we had been simply treating as intrepid journalism was in reality fine literature, concealing its rank out of courtesy, moving among us incognito that it might aid us all the more. *A Bookman's Letters* is letters in both senses of the word. It is not a collection of reprinted articles one feels. The articles, on the contrary, were but the advance instalments of this book. Instead of finding (as we had supposed) its perfect opportunity in causeries, the genius of Claudius Clear only reaches its full height when it is granted the larger scale and boundaries of a book.

II

Now, there are several traceable reasons for this, but they all circle round the simplest. It is this. These articles must be read in bulk before they yield their finest pleasures, because they are wholly unaffected. The writer who scores in brief articles, but goes to pieces in a book, is the man whose literary existence is a succession of attitudes; it is the essayist who always writes sincerely, who never strains outside his native temper, who only reaches his full vigour when collected. The reverse might seem more natural. Monotony, not added interest, might seem the fatal consequence of his composed adherence to one key. But in reality it is not so; the loyalty produces a new harmony; and the recurrence of certain elements, the slow disclosure of a personality, gives a wonderful new weight to every word. Even when the personality is not (as here it is decidedly) one eminent for charm and charming power, yet the massed result would still possess the finer beauty. For the basic attribute of art is simply unity, congruity: and the book written wholly with sincerity,

with no anxious thought of being various, will possess a rhythm, a comeliness, an actual technical attractiveness, far subtler than any which the literary acrobat secures. It is an involuntary beauty; it comes without calculation; it is the direct reward, indeed, of an absolute effortlessness. It is the result of the use of a vocabulary that has become actually commonplace to the writer, and of a refusal to adopt deliberate forms. And it produces a kind of prolonged cadence, a continual fitness of phrase, every word in deep accord with every other. The whole thing has a high, clear symmetry and shapeliness; it hangs unconsciously sheathed and circled by its bloom.

As undetachable as it is undeliberate, it is impossible, of course, to reproduce this inclusive spell by slicing segments; it requires every page to evoke it, for its chief, essential beauty is just the way it webs exactly all. But quotation can do something. It can illustrate some of the characteristics of the personality behind—and since in this case, more than most, "the style is the man," the reader may get some hints of the harmony—remembering always that this concord depends, not on chiming syllables, but on a certain human candour and consistency. I therefore give some extracts from the *Letters* which have seemed to me specially typical, adding a word or two as to the attributes each betrays.

## III

The beginning of my love for Meredith was on this wise: My father was a subscriber to a literary journal, long dead, called *The Critic*. He had preserved many of the old numbers, and I found them delightful reading. Some of the most eager and generous spirits of the time were contributors, and there was much about new poets and the coming dawn, all written in the optimist spirit of the early fifties. Mr. W. M. Rossetti reviewed in *The Critic* Mr. Meredith's first book, the poems of 1851. He

had the wisdom to quote *Love in the Valley*, which he justly called a very charming, rhythmical, and melodious poem. . . . Every boy finds out some lyrics which he takes to his heart, and *Love in the Valley* was chosen by me, along with Sydney Dobell's *In the Hall the Coffin waits*, Alexander Smith's *The Garden and the Child*, and some of Tennyson's. Tennyson read the lines in *The Critic*, and said he could not get them out of his head, such was their magical music and melody. The poem, in fact, has its sure place in the golden scriptures of love. It should be reprinted in its original form, with the lines which Meredith added after publication, but never gave to the public. There is a copy of the 1851 book, interleaved with notes and corrections and additions by the author, which ought to be published in its completeness.

I quote this—the opening paragraph of the opening essay on Meredith—because it seems to me to reflect, so exactly, the two leading qualities, blended so rarely, which we referred to just now—Claudius Clear's power, on the one hand, of minute, concrete recollection, and, on the other, exercised simultaneously, the generous play of a soaring enthusiasm. There are not many men in England who could trace their knowledge of Meredith so exactly and with such an accompaniment of bookish facts; but there are probably none who could pass instantly from the exercise of that faculty to that delighted acclamation about "the golden scriptures of love." Golden scriptures of love don't interest bibliographers. People capable of raptures for such scriptures have no heads for facts and dates. But sense and sensibility, in the case of Claudius Clear, work always happily together; and much of this book's special character springs directly from the constant interplay of these two elements of exactness and enthusiasm—cold memory performing its business-like feats whilst emotion whirls passionately by its side.

The combination recurs here, in a slightly different

way. It is another passage from the same paper on Meredith:—

In Aberdeen I found a fellow-admirer in William Minto. We often discussed him and the obstacles to his popularity, and his astonishing genius. We proposed a pilgrimage to Box Hill, and I took my journey there one morning many years ago. I went into a bookseller's shop, and asked if he had a photograph of Meredith. A bright child in the shop turned round and said, "Why, you are speaking about my father." By this time Meredith was beginning to get a vogue. There is a story of five men meeting and resolving that Meredith should be boomed. These were Grant Allen, and Saintsbury, and Minto, and Henley, and another unnamed. The result of the gathering was that Meredith *was* boomed.

How nobly George Meredith demeaned himself through all this! He never whined, he never uttered even a complaint. It is needless to say that he never lowered the pitch of his writings. He did his very best, adding to the permanent stores of literature one noble book after another, without for a moment stooping to the spirit of a hireling. In fact, it might almost be said of him that he became so used to standing alone that he moved away as the world crept up to him, and went further into the wilderness. His life was as noble and stainless and simple as his books. No more august and majestic figure has been seen among us.

The next extract is from the paper on Richard Garnett (which begins: "When I woke up on Good Friday morning, 1906, the first thought that passed through my mind was, 'I shall see Dr. Garnett and talk to him about J. R. Lowell.' He had written in the current *Bookman* an article on Lowell, and it must have been almost the last thing that came from his pen. Shortly after, I opened a paper, and read there that Dr. Garnett was dying—in fact, he was dead."). The qualities betrayed by it do not need annotation. We declare our affinities by what we honour. The incident here recorded, the courtesy remembered fondly, tell us much of the qualities the writer's

heart finds most desirable. It is biography—but it is autobiography as well.

> Every one could and did pour his story into Dr. Garnett's ear, and he was indefatigable in his attempts to help and relieve. . . . He would rewrite a piece of doggerel; he would touch up and correct a poor essay, and send it with a letter of recommendation to an editor. Above all, he was ceaselessly endeavouring to get work for the unemployed. His editorial friends were sometimes embarrassed by his persistence. Dr. Garnett thought that everybody was good for something, and credited every one with the same kind intentions as his own. . . .
>
> This is not the whole. Dr. Garnett never allowed himself to treat contemptuously those who were in difficulty, and no ingratitude wearied him out. On one subject he would never speak—the oddities of the Reading Room. I shall never forget one little experience I had of his behaviour. One day I happened to be with him in his own room at the British Museum. A poor lady came in with a pitiful and an embarrassing story. It was almost impossible to avoid a smile at the way she told it. Dr. Garnett listened with the utmost courtesy, promised to do what he could, and showed her out. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would at least have exchanged a friendly smile over the interview. Dr. Garnett carefully looked elsewhere, and turned the conversation on to something else. She was a woman, and she was destitute—it was enough. More than once I tried to get from him his impressions of Grub Street, but on this subject his lips were locked. What all this means very few can understand; but the better one understands the more he will admire Dr. Garnett. I had a true reverence for his character.

I take next two passages from the essay on *Learning to Read*. The writer here speaks of matters that bring him specially close to all book-lovers, and the common interest will make them quick to gauge the accent. An essay on Emerson may merely impress them, memories of Meredith can be read impersonally—it is the biographer's success, indeed, to be overlooked; but when he deals with our special hobby, as here, our eyes are fixed on his own bearing, our approval relates directly to the man.

If I may, I should like to utter my own personal testimony, and it is this: Reading has been the chief pleasure of my life. It has given me so much pleasure that I feel I am in danger of falling into extravagance when I speak of it. The pleasure has gone on increasing, and is stronger now than ever. Of many things we grow weary in the course of years, but nowadays I have a greater happiness in reading than ever before, and I am thankful that this is so. . . .

James Payn, of happy memory, wrote an admirable essay against sham admiration in literature, in which he denounced the classics, the works of Thomas Love Peacock, and other respected performances. We are all entitled to choose our favourites, and to say frankly who these favourites are, no matter how stupid may be our choice. Once on a time people used to fill up albums of confessions. To one question, "Who is your favourite novelist?" I always wrote with perfect honesty and sincerity "The Rev. C. B. Greatrex." Probably no gentle reader has ever heard Mr. Greatrex's name. He wrote a novel which went through a magazine called *Hogg's Instructor*, and it was continued for volume after volume. The title of the tale is *Memoranda of a Marine Officer*, and that was my favourite story, and, to be perfectly candid, I think it is my favourite story still. But I have introduced it to various persons, eminent and not eminent, and no one could ever see anything in it. Years ago I discovered where the author was living. He was rector of a little parish called Hope, near Ludlow, and I went there, and found him old, and bent, and feeble. Whoever owes him anything, I owe him much, and hope some day to discharge my debt.

## IV

I had marked several other passages — but my space is done; and, indeed, the human grouping reflected in those last few lines is too tender and charming to be blurred by other scenes. And in its sweetness and humility, its courtesy and enthusiasm, its precise remembrance of the past and unashamed display of sentiment, it really does epitomize, rather perfectly, as in a picture, the pervasive influence that moulds this book, the personal element that gives it ripeness, rhythm, and beauty. It is the kindliest of books—not in its tolerance towards its

subjects only—but in the friendliness with which it treats the reader. There is no assumption of authority; whatever special knowledge Claudius Clear possesses is instantly placed freely at his correspondents' disposal in the form of a general fund of open facts. He is never oracular; he establishes, instantly, a human relationship with his reader, taking for granted a common fellowship of aim and power. He never patronizes nor plays down; there is no attempt at ingratiation; with all this humility there goes the strictest sort of dignity. Such a writer, as I have said, always working within the bounds of his own temperament, betrays his sincerity in a certain consistency of epithet. He will eschew words that seem strange to him, withstanding their temptations, for he feels that only those which come familiarly will be sincere. Well, in this private vocabulary of Sir W. Robertson Nicoll's the words repeated most often are those which stand for certain simple human virtues: *courtesy*, *graciousness*, *nobility*, *gentleness*—these recur again and again. But, of them all, none is so hardworked as *nobility*. This word, with its derivatives, occurs, I have calculated, close on half a hundred times. We may call it a *mot propre* in the sense that we speak of "proper" names; it is a mark of personality. This bookman is a Bibliographer in the elder meaning of the word: he sees all books as Bibles. And from their perusal he would gather, and through their criticism confer, lessons on the nobler conduct of the day's affairs.

"Greatest of living Scotsmen" he may or may not be—but we may be glad that so many think of him as that. For of the value of his power there can be no question. And if I recommend *A Bookman's Letters* without compromise to your attention it is simply in the hope of adding still further to his empire.

# THE ART OF MRS. MEYNELL

## I

I AM soberly convinced that the prose of Alice Meynell is absolutely the most perfect produced in our language for at least the last twenty years. There have been louder instruments than hers; there has been orchestration more complex; and there have been artists, no less honourable, who have parted with some purity of tone for the sake of a wider range of keys or strings. But unless it be some of the early work of Mr. W. B. Yeats (the essays he wrote in *Ideas of Good and Evil*), I can think of no prose-tissue—no, not even that of Mr. James—which presents a surface so free from the faintest falsity or blur, and that clings with so exquisite a closeness and transparency to the rippling body of the swiftly moving thought. And even in Mr. Yeats's case the purity is much more evident than the precision, for he was dealing with abstractions, ambiguities, shadowy mysteries, and it is as difficult to judge of the exactness of an image of vagueness as it would be to tell how perfectly a mirror reflected the dark. Moreover, the purity of Yeats's prose is a cozened and monastic purity, preserving its innocence by all kinds of organized denials. You will find no wit in any of his pages, no humour, no gaiety, no reference to the franker moods of common men; every word is chosen from a vocabulary of consecrated tokens, diligently

protected from anything worldly or profane. But Mrs. Meynell's sentences keep their purity whilst passing eagerly about the earth, and their words are drawn from many dialects and occupations. She writes on many subjects in this book[1]—on sleep and laughter and dress, on toys and flowers, on hills and books and cities; and it is among these things, undisdainfully, delightedly alive, that her phrases keep their footing so fastidiously—seeing and showing us only beauty, yet blinding us to nothing—stooping to play with children, mimicking their mimic talk, breaking off into bright raillery or mockery—yet always maintaining a poise, a place, a pure composure, and always preserving the spirit of the prose from any wrong.

Seen in relation to its surroundings, such writing becomes almost a revolt, an heroic attempt to recapture something we have lost. I would like to show you some examples of her workmanship, and to discuss its qualities with as much discrimination as I can. It is a task that needs a touch far lighter than my clumsy one—yet I selfishly attempt it for the sake of the pleasure which the mere handling of such fabrics confers.

## II

To mount a hill is to lift with you something lighter and brighter than yourself or than any meaner burden. You lift the world, you raise the horizon ; you give a signal for the distance to stand up. It is like the scene in the Vatican when a Cardinal, with his dramatic Italian hands, bids the kneeling groups to arise. He does more than bid them. He lifts them, he gathers them up, far and near, with the upward gesture of both arms ; he takes them to their feet with the compulsion of his expressive force. Or it is as when a conductor takes his players to successive heights of music. You summon the sea, you bring the mountains, the

[1] *The Collected Prose of Mrs. Meynell* (Burns & Oates).

distances unfold unlooked-for wings and take an even flight. You are but a man lifting his weight upon the upward road, but as you climb, the circle of the world goes up to face you.

It is the law whereby the eye and the horizon answer one another that makes the way uphill so full of universal movement. All the landscape is on pilgrimage. The town gathers itself closer, and its inner harbours literally come to light; the headlands repeat themselves; little cups within the treeless hills open and show their farms. In the sea are many regions. A breeze is at play for a mile or two, and the surface is turned. There are roads and curves in the blue and in the white. Not a step of your journey up the height that has not its replies in the steady motion of land and sea. Things rise together like a flock of many-feathered birds.

Partly, I dare say, I pick that passage first, to spread before you and win your admiration, because it is an old favourite of my own, one I fell irrecoverably in love with years ago—and one, therefore, no doubt, that has had far more to do than I can measure with forming my ideas of perfect prose. I know every curve, pause, and glide in those two verbal "movements" (the movements that open the essay called *The Horizon*,) as well as I know the cadences of the *Grecian Urn* or *Kubla Khan*—better, in fact, because prose has always meant more to me than verse—I can approach the former with a frankness and an eagerness which the latter, to some extent, oppresses and confounds. And to re-read it is accordingly to feel, perhaps factitiously, that I am seeing my ideals being line for line fulfilled. The pleasure which I take to be the joy of beholding my dreams of certain technical perfections coming true may be only the lazy pleasure one takes in familiar things, the easygoing content of recognition.

It is only honest to own that. But, just as honestly, I don't believe it is anything of the kind. Making large allowance for this bias, I still find

those two paragraphs almost flawless in their exactness and beauty. Coldly applying to them the brutal tests one has learned, self-protectively, in very different fields, one finds no true requisition slighted, no false prerogatives claimed, nothing done for the sake of surface finesse. It isn't prose-poetry; it isn't rhetoric or singsong. It is all as honest as machinery, it does its work with absolute economy, and every touch is strong as a hammer-stroke, though timed and directed so perfectly that it just skims like a caress the tremulous nerves of the eye. It is the very opposite of "fine writing," for fine writing is a way of rising from earth into an emotional vagueness; and the quality of this work is that it takes a vague emotion (in this case the actual ecstasy of ascent) and reduces it to a definite, delicate set of precisely traced responses and laws. It is all as exact as geometry, though it moves like a song—it is "metrical" in both senses of that word.

> On the horizon, moreover, closes the long perspective of the sky. There you perceive that an ordinary sky of clouds—not a thunder sky—is not a wall, but the underside of a floor. You see the clouds that repeat each other grow smaller by distance; and you find a new unity in the sky and earth that gather alike the great lines of their designs to the same distant close. There is no longer an alien sky, tossed up in unintelligible heights.
>
> Of all the things that London has forgone, the most to be regretted is the horizon. Not the bark of the trees in its right colour; not the spirit of the growing grass, which has in some way escaped from the parks; not the smell of the earth unmingled with the odour of soot; but rather the mere horizon. No doubt the sun makes a beautiful thing of the London smoke at times, and in some places of the sky; but not there, not where the soft, sharp distance ought to shine. To be dull there is to put all relations and comparisons in the wrong, and to make the sky lawless.

These are not "pathetic fallacies." They are simply splendid facts; and the whole essay is a circumstan-

tial statement. It is just a statement made precisely in words of normal size and frequency of an experience open to us all, and gaining its beauty, its significance, its immortal claim upon the memory, from the application to that experience of the poised and perfect senses required to deal so delicately with words. "Only look closely enough, clearly enough," such writing seems to say to us, "only look with sufficient keenness and candour, and the commonest sight or experience will infallibly divulge a delicate, dramatic design. And only reproduce that design" (it continues, turning now particularly to those who write) "with sufficient fidelity, and your prose will have its pattern, its logic and surprises; the words will spread neatly out before you, naturally composed, like a gaily coloured map. And if to this clarity of eyesight" (it seems to conclude) "there be but added, in poised measure, an equal sensitiveness to sound, then will the words, as they are sorted, fall automatically into a scheme that repeats the map in music, so that the meaning floats reflected in the overhanging aural mist, as in an inverted fairy mirror."

III

But if it is naturally in the Essays which deal with the universal elements of life, with Hills and Clouds and Rivers, Flowers and Rain, that we seem to catch most clearly this implicit testimony to the transforming power of honest vision, it is in the chapters where the subjects are humaner, where Mrs. Meynell deals with mortal idiosyncrasies and laws, that her sensibility makes discoveries beyond the reach of science, and formulates perceptions that make some of these pages almost sibylline. There is so much human wisdom in this book! Meredith once imagined Carlyle listening to his wife whilst

she read some of these very papers—"listening without the weariful gesture, hearing them to the end, and giving his comment 'That woman thinks!'" *Domus Angusta*, *Hours of Sleep*, *At Monastery Gates*—the sentences in these, limpid and sweet, are distillations of wisdom — mountain-honey, a succession of pure drops. And the Essays on Childhood, which form the last section of the book, are coffers of clear observation, probably unique in their fine faithfulness, made in that little kingdom where all the dwellers have consciousnesses terribly easily bruised, and where the presence of a register so wonderfully sensitive, quite unhardened and unblurred, can give guidance of the most instant human value to us whose apprehensions are more dull. "To attend a living child," says Mrs. Meynell, "is to be baffled in your humour, disappointed of your pathos, and set freshly free from all preoccupations. . . . You are the fellow-traveller of a bird. The bird alights and escapes out of time to your footing."

For a wild hour (she says of one of her children—The Child of Tumult—a boy) he is the enemy of the laws. If you imprison him you may hear his resounding voice as he takes a running kick at the door, shouting his justification in unconquerable rage. "I'm good now!" is made as emphatic as a shot by the blow of his heel upon the panel. But if the moment of forgiveness is deferred, in the hope of a more promising repentance, it is only too likely that he will betake himself to a hostile silence and use all the revenge yet known to his imagination. "Darling mother, open the door!" cries his touching voice at last; but if the answer should be "I must leave you for a short time for punishment," the storm suddenly thunders again. "There (*crash!*) I have broken a plate, and I'm glad it is broken into such small pieces that you can't mend it. I'm going to break the 'lectric light." When things are at this pass there is one way, and only one, to bring a child to an overwhelming change of mind; but it is a way that would be cruel, used more than twice or thrice in his whole career of tempest and defiance. This is to let him see that his mother is troubled. "Oh, don't cry! Oh, don't be sad!" he roars, unable still to deal with his own passionate anger, which

is still dealing with him. With his kicks of rage he suddenly mingles a dance of apprehension lest his mother should have tears in her eyes. Even while he is still explicitly impenitent and defiant he tries to pull her round to the light, that he may see her face. It is but a moment before the other passion of remorse comes to make havoc of the helpless child, and the first passion of anger is quelled outright.

Mrs. Meynell has no successors among the writers of to-day; she seems for the moment to be the last of her line. Reasons for this might be found: as, for example, the current revolt against artificiality (which may be good), leading to a contempt for formal discipline (which is bad); or, again, the transformation of the quiet Essay into the alert, immediate Article, timed to catch and please the 8.15 to Town. And catch it, indeed, it does—but how much it leaves behind! Some of the greatest gifts, perhaps, that lie in penmanship. Yet we need not be too concerned. There are permanent elements in life, as permanent as the blue of the sky; they may be clouded for a little, but always they recur; and the art of Mrs. Meynell stands for these. A very little while, and our loss will be discovered, there will be a startled cry of "Halt!"—and with the great grinding and commotion that always accompanies these reactions the movement will begin to reverse. When that day comes let us hope somebody will have the wisdom to remember this book and use it as a guide; for it indicates the farthest point yet reached by English prose along the line of its surest advance; and it is from its last page that its next advance must spring. Meanwhile—here it is for the consolation of readers a little dizzied by the hearty chaos of to-day: a calm centre to the storm—a testing-place for standard—a constant minister and stimulant to that candour, that courtesy, and that honour unafraid, which are the essentials of all "style," in life or letters.

*Liverpool Courier*, 1914.

## C. E. MONTAGUE

"THE Literary Novel"—up it goes again, that horrible headline, and after it the usual rigid gush—the creaky praise of professionals bound to prove themselves capable of thoroughly enjoying such a feast of pure intellect—but unable to choke back altogether a healthy class-hatred for such things—and neatly turning the resentment to excellent official account by making it give the praise an effect of baffled benevolence, as who should say: brilliancy, but not the best kind; blue blood, but we so much like it bluer. Whereas the truth is not only that it runs a coarse and common red, but that it makes a rough-and-tumble attitude almost necessary—that absolutely the only people able to enjoy *The Morning's War*[1] perfectly will be the lucky half-illiterates, the readers born letter-deaf—the bluff, inaudient audience that sees words as things, and simply wants facts, not effects. All the rest—the æsthetes and the epicures, the connoisseurs and expert auditors, sons of the holy Pater and collectors of styles—it will simply reduce to a state of collapse. It will pull their nerves taut and then shred them diabolically. It will teach those superior tympana of theirs an extremely humiliating lesson. Think of a violin being played pizzicato persistently—your ear astrain all the time for the relaxing curve of the melody and the lulling slopes when the bow begins to glide. It is like that: the pizzicato goes on and goes

[1] *The Morning's War.* By C. E. Montague (Methuen).

on : a perpetual clicking of fairy-sized sabots in a dance that seems to drill the strung sense : the bow never droops. Or it is like watching a skylark go rocketing up ; you listening breathless to the breathless rain of small notes, ready to relax with a sigh of wondering relief when the bird at last owns itself mortal too, and takes the soft plane back to earth ; and finding that the song never does cease, that the bird simply goes on. Listen—

Just where the stone tooth rose out of the snow, the snow swelled out, gumlike, a little ; not that the ice which it covered was less steep there than below ; but a little more snow could cling to it there, by freezing on to the unsunned rock ; and so for a couple of feet from the base of the tooth the gum only fell away convex, before dropping sheer. By this hanging shelf the guide set out to steal round to the foot of the pinnacle, gingerly stamping the snow at each step until it would form a hard tread, frozen fast to the steep ice beneath. He was well out of sight round the bulge when his shout came for June to come carefully on. She committed herself to his vestiges. Aubrey, well planted, paid out the rope to her frugally. Warily coasting the swell of the tooth, she paused where it pushed her out furthest.

"What's it like ?" Aubrey called. Could she be giving ?

She glanced back, a merry thought curling her lip. "It's like walking on one stilt. It's made of an icicle, with a hard snowball stuck on to its side, and that's the stilt's step."

Did you ever hear such a dancing of dactyls, and tripping of trochees, and ruthless absence of iambs and ease ?

*Just where the | stone tooth rose | out of the | snow, the | snow swelled out, | gum-like, a | little*

Dactyl and dactyl and dactyl again ; then up on the trochee bestriding the comma ; then on again, dactyl and dactyl, with the metallic clink of the last trochee *little* to plug up the sequence securely. Again—

*So for a | couple of | feet from the | base of the | tooth the gum*

Pure dactyls, unbroken, in fives. Then a few anapæsts, inverting the accent, but always keeping it serrated and sharp. Then—

*gingerly | stamping the | snow at each | step until*

Back into dactyls again. Whilst "*warily coasting the swell of the tooth she paused where it pushed her out furthest*" repeats the first bar exactly—length, footing, and all—down to the trim middle trochee, round which the rope of the sentence seems to take a loop and a hitch before lilting on to the riveting "*furthest.*" And the very dialogue goes skipping in dactyls as well: "'*What's it like?*' *Aubrey called. Could she be giving?*" Oh, it's implacable!

Do you wonder now that these drops, alert nodules of noise, sometimes seem to blur the scene like dancing hail?—that when you watch June and Aubrey out there on the Dent Rouge, working their way up its pinnacles, you want to brush the sound away impatiently, at any rate till the worst pitch is over, like a third climber teased by a drizzle? Rhythmic prose of any sort is infrequent enough: to find a whole novel written to music is rarer; but it isn't so much the mere presence of rhythm that rattles one, as the special, percussive, peremptory kind of it. Reconsider that paragraph, and see how it is all crisped with consonants: every line end-stopped, every seam caulked; not an open vowel anywhere, no interior glides; all polysyllables even, with their leave to the mind to ease off a bit, while the tongue threads its way round all the windings and curves that wrap up the single small meaning—even these ordinary indulgences barred. It is the unremitting rap of it that rings weaker brains silly, till they begin to count the crepitation mechanically: the spray of a sea can check and distract a man's swimming even though it forms a pure part of the element he revels in. And it doesn't bring much relief

to realize that the hailstones are all pearls, that every word is the perfectly right one—that the music, one means, is not orchestral, accompanying the action, but the very sound of the feet of the actors, the bare noise of the hammer-taps that drive the words home, every nail of them needed. That, indeed, is the chief strain. For that gives us the measure of the writer's self-challenge: shows him on the bare rock, deliberately unroped, no retreat possible. It makes you feel as though that violinist, playing a whole symphony pizzicato, were doing it poised on a billiard-ball balanced on a cue—and the plain fact that the whole thing simply must subside the next moment doesn't do much to induce a condition of placid dream. The subsidence never does come; metre, meaning, and metaphor, like three balls dancing in air, keep catching each other at the very moment of subsidence and restoring the impossible suspension. Sound-stress and sense-stress coincide purely: how perfectly let this passage illustrate:—

> The waiter awoke the bureau. . . . The faint buzz-uzz-uzz of the voice of the landlady, totting up columns of francs in her bower, had thinned down to stillness; will failed her, the strong bee invaded by autumn, even to index the dying year's honey; she leant back, her eyes slowly filming; dozing, she mused on those other dozers, four of them, out on the terrace, her summer's lingering roses—the last, she half-hoped, if the hope were not sin; were they gone, bees could sleep, and not dream of missed provender.

It ticks, turns, and recovers with the perfect timing of clockwork. And, almost instantly, yet a fourth ball is added—the element of vocal characterization. Impossible, it might be thought, to maintain this metre unbrokenly, a measure as personal as a profile or a signature (and personal precisely because it leaves no room for evasion), and yet allow the book's characters to speak with their dialects, with the rhythm of their

own idiosyncrasies and moods. Yet it is done, and without dodging; nay, with an extra difficulty sportingly thrown in. For every speech is made to echo, not personal accents only, but the intonations of a whole clan, a whole country: one of the first duologues, for example, is the exchange of twenty words each between an Irish priest and an extremely Swiss waiter; and though the book's measure beats through it all, its crisp pulse unblunted, the very flavour of race, qualified by the lips of individuality, makes each utterance as unakin as the men. The violinist, terrible fellow, is positively playing three sonatas as one; and when undergraduates, Cockney bookies, Blackburn mill-hands, German savants, retired ambassadors, North-country editors, Wicklow housekeepers, Connaught carmen, Catholic cardinals, and West End wives of millionaire knights gradually proceed to add the various vernaculars of Christ Church and the betting ring, of England's north and England's south, England's culture, England's rawness, and an equal number of subtly differentiated brogues, to the crystalline chime without damping or blurring, or distressing, or falsifying a single note of it . . . well, will the reader agree *now* that the only way to enjoy the tale properly is to stop the ears firmly and read the book before you with a single sense, the eye?

Honestly—one means all this. It is not a form of irony. And the root reason is extraordinarily interesting. For this constant snap and click of reiterant anapæsts, this avoidance of the shadowy grottoes of rhetoric, is but a technical by-product of a rage for honest exactness, of a refusal to take refuge in haze, which finds its chief expression in a glad pursuit of the concrete, in an insistence on submitting every utterance to the test of definition, and in a delight, almost crooning, in the very "feel" of all solids, in the diminutive density of the concrete when

mimicked—a delight that is passed on to the reader in the form of a kindled new consciousness of the wonder of reality, of the vivid, sun-splashed reality that forms the original of the cunning wee model. The chief characters of this book are constantly going up into high places—in the Alps, in the Peak, in West Ireland, even in "the heart of the sweetness of Surrey." It is their maker's passion for the patterned map the height gives that really drives them there; and the same passion living along all the nerves he endows them with shows us, irresistibly, in rinsed moments of time, all those bright kingdoms of the earth that are ours if we would only wake up and enter them. No book more realistic, more earthy and pagan, has been written since—but why compare? There has never yet been a book that more honestly realized all the acts, facts, and emotions it touches. Things that have been happening every day since the beginning of life seem here to find for the first time the formula that fits them—the queer pathos of little lights beginning their silent struggle again—"*far down the mountain a spark struck itself, as it seemed, struggled and blinked for a moment, then steadied itself and burned on, a pin-prick of light in the wide pit of blackness*": or the gnomish, changeling look of streets seen at dawn, "the first shadows reaching to all lengths about them, in unfamiliar directions." The power that "places" these things, seeing them so acutely and cutting their replica like a gem, is exactly the power, applied to other senses, which strengthens him to eschew iambs and polysyllables, suspicious of the licence their laxity gives—scorning their help even more than their hindrance, refusing to leave a single sound uncemented, vaguely cut, lest something should leak in accidentally, giving an effect undeserved, as well as undesigned. Nothing must be left to luck, and there must be no false pretences:

the reader shall see everything without fee-fo-fumming or fakes. And upon every detail already firm, by way of self-payment, the craftsman will leap with a gurgle of gratitude, delicately gloating, and repeat all its lucidity, deliciously concentrated, in his little percussive ivory carvings of words. It may be only a man's wrist, seen in the sun ("*where the joint was a modelled steel nut among swart, hairy straps*"); or it may be Mont Blanc ("*obtuse amid arrowy peaks like a house among poplars*"). It may be the slanting edge of the south coast of England ("*planed into shape with the rub, rub of shingle pressed, always one way, by the Atlantic's hand*"); or the pattern pricked on the ear by the patter of clogs heard at a Lancashire daybreak ("*the dots of sound, running together, becoming a line, and a thick one*"); or the filmy course of a white owl's flight ("*floating over their heads in a chain of linked circles that moved with them, lying outspread on the air without sound or effort*"). Always the avid sense seeks out the structure, and the cunning hand repeats it minimized, made elfin and exquisite, in a space the size of a letter in a missal, but as perfectly proportioned and as plain as a plan.

Two difficulties will suggest themselves. The first: How can a tense, Pre-Raphaelite technique like this, and all the lust for lineal salience behind it, hope to tackle sympathetically and truthfully render the shadowy forces and glimmering half-ghosts of half-ghosts that lie behind the mask of behaviour? Won't its very contempt for generalizations force it to generalize here—crushing fluid things into a bodily compactness, turning the winds of the spirit into crystals? Perhaps sometimes it does. There are characters that are uncompromising. They seem to know, not only their own part, but the theory of it. And it is this effect of rigidity and the consequent sense of something having been arbitrarily smashed

when it yields that produces the only passage that leaves unconviction behind it.

And the other doubt (which does recur, as you read—with stopped ears) is whether this Pre-Raphaelite absorption in detail, this greedy extraction of every ounce of its colour, isn't perhaps being indulged in at the cost of the whole design. The answer to that is the cry of delight that the reader gives when he turns at the end and looks back. For since the joys have always sprung from the actual, the proportions have kept the measure of life; the tick of that metre is the pulse of reality; the architecture is always the earth's. It is not at all a "literary novel," that is to say; it is a book for farmers and sailors and lovers and pioneers and (perhaps) the muter members of the Alpine Club. It ought to be read on Great Gable, stung by storm, gale, and sun, with the becks below crying up whenever the wind droops. And it is perfectly awful to think (what will certainly be true) that it will be pounced on as their special perquisite by the dilettanti, by the connoisseurs and æsthetes and auditors. And that they will get in the way of that climb up the Dent Rouge with their talk about trochees and dactyls. Blame the spray in our eyes!

*Manchester Guardian*, 1913.

## RUPERT BROOKE

### I

THE war has at last given birth to a good battle-song. It rings out from the next number of *New Numbers* —that grey quarterly which a quartet of young poets began to issue some twelve months ago, and which is still courageously not merely keeping alive in spite of the war, but actually growing more living by dint of it. One of the quartet (and the greatest, I still firmly believe) is our fellow-townsman, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie. Another, the youngest, is Mr. Rupert Brooke—and it is from his lips that the new song has sprung. It is not a long song, so I can repeat it all. Its title is simply *The Soldier*. It accepts the traditional form.

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed:
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less,
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day,
And laughter, learnt of friends, and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Poetry is always preciser than prose, more brief, more direct and exact; its exquisite curves as businesslike as the hardly less lovely lines whose lift and lapse make common shorthand so decorative. And those fourteen bars of beautiful melody somehow manage to cage, more completely than ever before, one of the dimmest and deepest, one of the most active but most elusive, of all the many mixed motives, beliefs, longings, ideals, which make those of us who have flung aside everything in order to fight still glad and gratified that we took the course we did. There do come moments, I must admit, when doubts descend on one dismally, when one's soldiering seems nothing but a contemptible vanity, indulged in largely to keep the respect of lookers-on. And, of course, cowardice of that sort, a small pinch of it anyway, did help to make most of us brave. There was the love of adventure, too, the longing to be in the great scrum—the romantic appeal of "the neighing steed and the shrill trump"—all the glamour and illusion of the violent thing that has figured for ever in books, paintings, and tales, as the supreme earthly adventure. . . . But beneath all these impulses, like a tide below waves, there lies also a world of much deeper emotion. It is a love of peace, really, a delight in fairness and faith—an inherited joy in all the traditional graces of life and in all the beauty that has been blessed by affection. It is an emotion, an impulse, for which the word "patriotism" is a term far too simple and trite. It is an impulse defined precisely, without suppression, blur, or excess, in the fourteen flowing lines I have quoted. One fights for the sake of happiness—for one's own happiness first of all, certain that did one not fight one would be miserable for ever—and then, in the second place, for the quiet solace and pride of those others, spiritual and mental sons of ours, if not actually

physical—the men of our race who will depend for so much of their dignity upon the doings of the generation before. War is a boastful, beastly business; but if we don't plunge into it now we lower the whole pitch of posterity's life, leave them with only some dusty relics of racial honour. To enter into this material hell now is to win for our successors a kind of immaterial heaven. There will be an ease and a splendour in their attitude towards life which a peaceful hand now would destroy. It is for the sake of that spiritual ease and enrichment of life that we fling everything aside now to learn to deal death.

II

*The Soldier* is Mr. Rupert Brooke's finest poem, I think; but he has others in this same number worth remembering. I like this:—

Now, God be thanked Who has watched us with His hour,
  And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping;
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
  To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
  Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
  And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there
  Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
    Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to share the laughing heart's long peace there,
  But only agony, and that has ending;
    And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

Finally, there is this royal requiem:—

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
  There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
  But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.

These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
  Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene
  That men call age; and those who would have been
Their sons, they gave their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
  Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
  And Nobleness walks in our ways again,
And we have come into our heritage.

That series of sonnets seems to me to sum up all that is best in our present persuasion. Those who have felt the impulses it expresses will find their convictions confirmed, their nerve strengthened, their pride and their courage redoubled. And those who have never yet felt them will be unable, I hope to God, to read without experiencing a sudden revelation, a revelation that will endow them with a manly mission at last and turn them into exultant Crusaders.

*Liverpool Courier*, 1915.

## LIONEL JOHNSON'S PROSE

THERE were both disorder and defiance in Lionel Johnson's brief life, but to read this wise collection of his prose[1] is to wonder whether all the rebelliousness may not have been a sort of twisted barrier, behind which, as in a secret garden, he could grow the white flowers of an austere and untroubled art. A shining rectitude lies on all these pages, and a noble quiet; the reader walks unwearied in the high, clear, windless atmosphere of reverie. Merely reviews, for the most part—done for different dailies and weeklies, and mostly anonymous—there is not one of them with an anxious or excessive line, and few that fail to achieve, in addition, what one of his own shining phrases calls "the severe beauty of a starry night." And it is scholar's script too—its aloofness fortified by knowledge, quickened by golden comparisons, and continually ennobled by the presence of royal phrases from the saints and the singers—from Crashaw, Aquinas, à Kempis—Milton's Latin, Lucian's Greek. Simply as a concourse of these things the book is a delight, and Johnson's own periods move among their "crested and prevailing" visitors with an air as composed and highbred as their own. Just a little *too* composed, perhaps. In a slight sleekness here and there—something almost complacent—one may detect a weakness; it is sometimes as though an everyday idea, caught conversationally, had been brushed and

[1] *Post Liminium.* Essays and Critical Papers. By Lionel Johnson. Edited by Thomas Whittemore (Elkin Mathews).

laundered and then sent out again as literature. Yet this may be as much the fault of the matter as of the method. It is of books he is speaking—often of the very noblest books—and he does his Erasmus or his "Fioretti" or his "Marius" the honour of approaching them with ceremony—if he does not seem to bow it is because he will not stoop. And even when the elegance seems least appropriate it does not do to call it snobbishness. When he turns, for instance, in his essay on Pater to speak of the plain facts of his master's career and says—

> Fifty-five years of life, some thirty of literary labour: it affords room for production in goodly quantity when, as in this case, there are also leisure, felicitous circumstances, scant hindrance from the pressure of the world—

we may check at the stilted "scant" and the "goodly," suspecting a mere perfumed pedantry; but to have dropped the mantle for a moment there might have meant fumblings and an irreverent awkwardness a line or two later when he enters on an utterance like this:—

> In all this mode of seeing things and of undergoing their influence, the inflowing of their spirit, there is a mysticism not unlike Swedenborg's doctrine of celestial correspondences; or that mystical interpretation of nature so necessary to Newman, as when he says of the angels, "Every breath of air and ray of light and heat, every beautiful prospect is, as it were, the skirts of their garments, the waving of the robes of those whose faces see God in Heaven"; a sacramental and symbolic theory of the universe, which *Spiritus intus alit*; whereby, as Mr. Pater has it, "all the acts and accidents of daily life borrow a sacred colour and significance." A perpetual wondering joy in the messages brought by beautiful things, through their visible forms, was a kind of worship to him; he had a Franciscan poetry in the almost childlike freshness of his delight in them; though "refining upon his pleasure," as Crashaw put it, he carefully sought out the precise secret of the delight.

There indeed the vestments are fitting, and the thought rises level with its companions, and the serene lapse of the clauses that surround the quotations has a movement almost as lovely as that of the messengers they bear. It is true that it has nothing of the sudden, carbonic brilliance of essential thought set free by hard cutting. This is manifestly the beauty that is gained by delicate accretions—clause silting subtly over clause, film upon film, until the whole substance is a cloudy shimmer and the germ has grown into a gem. But then that is how pearls, true pearls, always *are* made. And when an artist offers you pearls it is foolish to ask for a stone.

Was that sharp division between his art and his life, then, a wholly good thing for the latter—a way of working off any wilfulness externally, leaving the rest free to blossom undisturbed? We once heard the purest artist living—an old friend of Johnson's—Yeats himself—urge that it was so. "Beauty is the spoil and the monument of such battles" was one of his high phrases. Yet it is a proposition one wants not to accept. And there *is* a certain paleness in this prose—and the paleness is the price of its purity. For after all there are only two ways in which a writer can make such critical work independently and indestructibly vital—and Johnson held back from both. Life in the rough, on the one hand, whose strong intrusion can cross-fertilize criticism, he coldly and relentlessly locked out. There are only two places where the lines tremble—and that is because they are scorning the tremors of others—the nerves of Marie Bashkirtseff, the noisiness of Byron. ("He did one thing well: he rid the world of a cad—by dying as a soldier.") In the essay on Izaak Walton the word "river" never once occurs; in that on Stevenson one-third deals with Addison; in that on Savonarola we hear of "thunders of thought and

flames of desire"—but never once see the dire glare in the central piazza of the City of the Lilies. His figures of speech are never human figures; his metaphors are always august—even Nature herself only enters obliquely, thrown back by the mirrors of the poets. We were once told that this Johnson knew Boswell's *Life* by heart; but he was not sealed of the tribe of Sam. Even when he turns to praise his London it is still life at one remove that we get—life carefully filtered through earlier letters before judged fit for his own:—

> To the lover of London the noisy, flaring streets are a hunting-ground of emotions, a garden of ideas. Going out into the crowded day or the tumultuous night, fresh from Apuleius or Lucian, he will find all that ancient wit and beauty informed with new life. He wonders how Smollett would have hit off these motley humours. . . .

It is the noise of London heard through closed shutters, as in his room at Clifford"s Inn. And then, on the other hand, he was insufficiently the renunciant. He was too temperate an ascetic. A man may brood above a single book until it becomes a door opening upon the infinite—can concentrate on his bookish essay till it becomes fuller of stir and vitality than the crowded streets he disdains. Pater could do that—Mr. Yeats can do that—so could Francis Thompson and Symons. But Johnson—no. After building those barriers against life he had perhaps too little energy. A sense of space and wide issues haunts this work—but it is gained by material devices, by a beautiful tangling of his topic among other topics—by extending, not by transforming it. He thrust his delicate hands into the air about him, into Apollo's garden, brought them back laden with lovely rumours and echoes; but the effect is still finite. Instead of the original flower we have a wonderful cluster

exquisitely arranged. But there has been no passionate distillation of the celestial honey hidden in the first.

But come!—do let us be proportionate. These things were only meant for journalism, and here we are testing them with reagents as drastic as those which he applied to the high masters. It is wonderful that they withstand them so well—and, for other reviewers, a model and a reproof; but it is not fair. And then, too, there is always his poetry—where, perhaps, the consecration was completed and the grail achieved. It is needful to remember that, in order to complete the picture. This prose of his was perhaps just an interspace, a compromise, a dim and subdued half-world. Clifford's Inn sounds cloistered—but how far away is the snarl of Fleet Street? Life to a man like Johnson may well have seemed a rather hellish business; his poetry is purely paradisal and here, in these pages, we are perhaps watching his beautiful spirit pacing coldly in the purgatory of its choice.

*Manchester Guardian*, 1912.

## GEORGE MEREDITH'S LETTERS

THE year 1912 has brought us no braver, richer, wiser books than the two volumes of *The Letters of George Meredith*; and though criticism, as is proper, sprang at once to the salute on the morning of their first appearance, it will be long before it moves beyond their range, ceases to sound and to distil them. Not, indeed, that they require interpreters. They are not a prize for the literate, to be prepared for in the novels, read in their light or undeservingly. Rather they come before the novels, make a centre from which the latter spring—to come to them is like breaking through a bright labyrinth of boughs to the solid stem which shows us the quiet logic of the branching, blossomed maze. And shows us views beyond. We stand at the centre of a circle of which the novels are but an elaborated segment. "The art of novels," he says in one of these letters, "is to present a picture of life; but novel-writing embraces only a narrow portion of life. I trust that I keep my eyes on the larger outlook." These books let us share that outlook, and to do that is to be swept up as to a sudden tower, and see men and the world afresh, and the land lying clear like a plan, great winds meanwhile bringing news of heaven, stirring and renovating the blood. It is hard to speak of the sight without rhetoric. Yet the reasons for its supremacy are plain. Like Goethe, like Shakespeare, this man was that rare thing the poet-philosopher,

realist and idealist in one: luckier than Shakespeare, than Goethe, he came at an hour when the mists were melting from the face of knowledge and it had become possible for an heroic spirit to test all things anew for itself. More inveterately honest than any man of his time save Carlyle, and with far more than Carlyle's power of brain and steady, sanguine pressure of soul, Meredith set himself to prove knowledge anew, and built up his vision of life block by block, shirking nothing from sentiment or shame, beginning with the pagan roots and rising to a clear height above the creeds—and to read these letters is to watch him actually making that tremendous traverse. He begins with the earth and builds up. "For my part, I love and cling to the earth as the one piece of God's handiwork that we possess." "The way to the spiritual life lies in the complete unfolding of the creature, not in the nipping of his passions. An outrage to Nature helps to extinguish his light. To the flourishing of the spirit through the healthy exercise of nature." "Never attempt to dissociate your ideas from the real of life. It weakens the soul; and, besides, it cannot be done—and again, it is a cowardly temporary escape into delusion, clouding the mind." These are thoughts, indeed, that recur in the novels, they form the quick heart of his songs; yet we are so framed that the sight of them in the making and in action moves us more than exhortations and swift verse. Here are the poems before condensation. We watch the creed being carved. He is not floated marvellously into the empyrean, there to orate. He climbs before our eyes; we count the steps as they are cut and hear the ring of the axe. The body and the body's needs come first; its dependence on soils and outer airs and coloured skies: "Let men make good blood, I constantly cry. I hold that to be rightly materialist

—to understand and take Nature as she is—is to get on the true divine highroad." So the senses bring him raw experience and the mind burns out the dross and the spirit fuses the residue into shining law, and within this resolute framework his character rises to an altitude whence it may sweep all horizons equally. His ultimate sympathies were complete. All the episodes and movements of his time —literary, political, social, philosophical—were lit up by the strong beam of his mind. And this effect of a complete cross-section of life, cut clean from peak to pit, is really augmented by the comparative fewness of the friends to whom this collection is addressed. It is not a complete collection, but it traces half a dozen deep friendships without a lapse; and all the normal episodes of existence seem thus to rotate in turn before his sight and receive his vivid judgment. It is a case of bodily sickness? Read the letter beginning "The principle of health is this: to make good blood plentifully and distribute it properly." Is it a case of spiritual perplexity? The clear passage that follows flies to offer guidance:—

Belief in the religion has done and does this good to the young: it floats them through the perilous sensual period when the animal appetites most need control and transmutation. If you have not the belief, set yourself to love virtue by understanding that it is your best guide both as to what is due to others and what is for your positive personal good. If your mind honestly rejects it, you must call on your mind to supply its place from your own resources. Otherwise you will have only half done your work, and that is always mischievous. Pray attend to my words on this subject. . . . We grow to good as surely as the plant grows to the light. The school has only to look through history for a scientific assurance of it. And do not lose the habit of praying to the unseen Divinity. Prayer for worldly goods is worse than fruitless; but prayer for strength of soul is that passion of the soul which catches the gift it seeks.

To a mercurial friend half-hesitantly in love:—

To have found a suitable person and to give her up for anything on earth is like seeing a jewel on the shore and rejecting it on account of the trouble of conveying it home. But do you strongly recognize the jewel? Have you found her? A boy can't, but a man must reason in these cases. You may know your love from its power of persisting and bearing delay. Passion has not these powers. If your love of this person is true and not one of your fancies, it will soon light you clear enough. . . . And don't be hasty and think you are trusting your instinct by grasping suddenly at the golden apple. Can you bear poverty for her? Will she for you? Can she, even if she would? Think whether you are risking it, and remember that very few women bear it and retain their delicacy and charm. Some do. Can you think her one of the chosen? . . .

To one wounded by death:—

There is no consolation for a bleeding heart. Only the mind can help it, when the showers have passed. I might be of use in talking with you. As it is, I do not know how far you have advanced in the comprehension of Life. I can but pray that you may be strengthened to bear what blows befall you, and ask for fortitude. This is the lesson for the young—that whatever the heart clings to lays it open to grief of necessity in such a world as ours, and whatever the soul embraces gives peace and is permanent. But that comes to us after many battles—or only to the strong mind which does not require it for enlightenment.

So the strong mind measures and speaks, and the words are final. Always the balance is firmly held. When he has made his summary (as in his estimate of the two Carlyles, or his statement of the position of women, or his utterances concerning Ireland or South Africa, or his appreciation of Thomson, or his judgments of his own writings, his defence of Diana) all seems to have been said; and when he is strongly moved by emotion, whether of indignation or joy, the urgency but lends power to his precision, never deflects his aim. When his eye dilates it sees most

clearly. When he is most generous (and the books abound in kingly praise) it seems but justice quickened, justice with unbandaged eyes. When his spirits are highest, riding gales of laughter, they are still securely poised: his very joviality is just. And when he speaks out of the night of his great sorrow, his mind numb with pain, the naked words have the nobility of music:—

> This place of withered recollections is like an old life to be lived again without sunshine. I cross and recross it. Sharp spikes where flowers were. Death is death, as you say, but I get to her by consulting her thoughts and wishes—and so she lives in me. This, if one has the strength of soul, brings the spirit to us. While she lingered I could not hope for it to last, and now I could crave any of the late signs of her breathing—a weakness of my flesh. When the mind is steadier, I shall have her calmly present—past all tears. . . .

One need not shrink from turning such a cry into a quotation: it makes the mood that deserves it. And only quotations could speak unbrokenly of the strong tenderness, the royal pride, the fortitude and deliberate honour that greet us on these pages, offering the soul a richer lesson than a creed. Each of the several sequences of letters traces the course of a friendship subtly varying, sensitively dipping and developing, yet leaving a track a delicate pen might still transcribe. But their complex interweaving makes a portrait that chokes utterance by the dear humanity of its charm. Like breathing virtues—like chivalry, gentleness, courage, actually experienced—the personal accents move us in the deep ways denied to art; and the gratitude that would praise them only stammers. But space disallows renewed quotation here: it is to the books themselves that the reader must turn if he would see the silent handgrips of friendship translated into words, and watch impetuous flights of affection and sudden ringing

prohibitions, and nobility playing happily with children, and pride receiving wounds without a word.

But there is one broad feature that must be noted, at first sight the most startling of all. For these letters make it clear that this resolute life, so nobly planned, so greatly lived, was yet essentially frustrate. If success be the perfect development and unswerving exercise of our finest powers, then Meredith has to be accounted failure. The apprehension has been spreading for some time that the best of his work is in his poems, and with it there has moved, as natural corollary, a presumption that his devotion to fiction was but another example of that perverse misapplication of their powers which artists of all kinds will keep displaying. Exactly the reverse, it seems, was true. He, too, knew that poetry was his proper task, and he fought passionately for leave to pursue it. The leave was never granted. "Truly the passion to produce verse in our region is accursed," he writes when he was in his fifties. "I ask myself why I should labour, and, for the third time, pay to publish the result, with a certainty of being yelled at and haply spat upon for my pains. And still I do it. I scorn myself for my folly." To pay for his poems he wrote novels, novels being apparently the public's taste. Too much of a poet and philosopher remaining in them, he had to condescend and compromise a second time, taking still more alien and still less useful task-work. "My novels have been kept back by having had to write for the newspapers—the only things that paid." The treble strain would have broken a smaller man; him it merely maimed. "My health is now far from good. I finished the last volume of a novel two years ago by writing at night for three months. An attack of whooping-cough followed on lowered nerves. I have never been well since then. My digestion is entirely deranged, and

still I have to write—and for a public that does not care for my work. . . . I have failed, and I find little to make the end undesirable. . . . I am so driven by work that I do not contend with misapprehension of me, or with disregard. Part of me has become torpid." He made a Viking's end, as all men know, "retaining his laugh in Death's ear," as in one of these letters he vows he will—"that being what our Maker prizes in men." But then he was one of those who "despised melancholy," he let "grief eat into me and never speak of it, partly because I despise the sympathy of fools and will not trouble my friends." He would not trail his tragedy. But in these letters the cry escapes.

It is hard to speak soberly of this wastage; but these two books, superior to all resentment, offer bitterness its best rebuke. And instead of rounding on the age that baffled him, the understanding course is no doubt to make the difference between them the measure of our gratitude for his coming. The difficulties he faced are the index to our need of him; had he been greeted gladly, suffered nothing, his value would have been the less. "Friend," he writes to Lord Morley—"friend, in the woods you and I may challenge the world to match us in happiness. Out of them I feel myself pulled back a century or so." We are approaching him now; the day will come when we will be his contemporaries. Meanwhile his past is our future, and these letters may help us like maps into the unknown. They will pass immediately into the stuff of living thought, making blood and tissue instantly; for they show us the fluttering ideals and dim desires of our day clearly formulated and alive. To read them is to find a groping track suddenly stiffening and straightening into highroad. Down that, towards his figure, we now press.

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# THE HOMELINESS OF BROWNING

## A CENTENARY ARTICLE

CRITICISM being what she is, and the stir of Tennyson's hundredth birthday-party having but newly subsided, to-day's proceedings will scarcely be expected to go through without at least one complacent side-glance at the rival celebration. It has by now almost become the official opening indeed; all through the sweltering days of the eighties and nineties, when both suns were blazing together, it was a refuge used without stint: instead of attempting to reconcile matters, explain the phenomenon, or of honestly tackling each in turn, our cunning writers used to make a labour-saving device of the difficulty—pit one giant against the other, and saunter off coolly dusting their hands as though things had been neatly cancelled out. And such comparisons can be commodious. Indulged in for a moment this morning, for instance, they would bring us sharply face to face at once with the most interesting problem now left—the sole remaining Browning conundrum. For one of the chief characteristics of the Tennysonian affair was a certain tameness and perfunctoriness: the toasts seemed tepid and formal, the old enthusiasm to have waned. But with our man—how richly the reverse! Never has he had so many, or such hearty and lusty, admirers as to-day. The haughty Browning Society, that used to hug itself in a grim isolation, is now only a black speck in the middle of a genial

mob. The books that baffled a Ruskin and were too tough for a Jowett are everybody's reading to-day —the only feature about them that bewilders us being the report that they ever bewildered any one. We need cribs for *Sordello* no longer; Polonius's occupation is gone. Miss Lilian Whiting has taken his place. The correct thing now is to run through *Pacchiarotto* with a smile, lay it down with a laugh, and then ask for something really craggy to break our minds on.

Now, there is more in this than the natural desire of us young folk to smile indulgently down upon our parents. It is not just posterity's pertness. Nor is it even due—altogether—to our unavoidable superiority. Nor yet to the way our musical ears have been genuinely quickened and toughened of late by the last crashing multiplex choruses, criss-crossed so variously, of the great late-Victorian choir. The main reason is something so simple—and yet, at the same time, so terribly like gawky paradox—that it is possible to feel shy about naming it. Named, however, it must be —this morning especially: for, being true, it involves a high tribute, and probably the tribute which Browning himself would most have liked to see us bringing. It was just his sweet sanity, then, that made him seem a madcap eccentric; it was his friendly normality and family likeness to themselves that filled our grandfathers with expostulating terror. No escaping this conclusion: look where you will, fresh evidence leaps up and locks you in. Take, first, the larger literary aspect. Seen suddenly against the elaborate curtain of nineteenth-century song, Browning does seem to stand out with an abrupt incongruity, like a workman in front of a tapestry. But when we step fifty years or so back from it, the figure not only falls into focus, but becomes a kind of centre-piece and summary, a concentration of all the colours behind: he almost

looks the artist who wove them—if he differs from each of the dim decorative figures that brood there, it is because he resembles them all. In *Paracelsus* alone it is possible to find a match for almost every tint—for Keats's famous blue and the lunar-rainbow lights of Shelley, for the romantic tartan of Sir Walter and Wordsworth's missionary black, and—yes!—even the cool, delicious dyes of Lotusland itself:—

> Heap cassia, sandal-buds and stripes
> Of labdanum and aloe-balls,
> Smeared with dull nard an Indian wipes
> From out her hair: such balsam falls
> Down seaside mountain pedestals. . . .

He can stalk Byronically—soar like his Suntreader, come to earth again as true and right as Tennyson. And the biography explains. "You might as well apply to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton as ask for any thing human and earthly from me," said Shelley. But "Browning is good at everything," wrote one of his friends. Poetry was but one of his passions: he boxed and he rode, he danced, fenced, fished, and travelled, painted, played, was a pattern man of affairs, had all the sound suburban virtues, lay awake at night if he owed a bill, and as a bank clerk would have been as great a success as his assiduous grandfather. One of his eyes, we are told, was exceptionally long-sighted, the other exceptionally short, and the blend gave him a vision of splendid balance and completeness. It is finely characteristic of the man who differed from other men not because he had one function hyper-developed but because he had all their faculties in noble measure, so that the result was a radiant normality. In no other two volumes of verse on our shelves, accordingly, do we find so much of life, in such right proportions and so prismatically mixed. Both halves of Rome are here. And, roughly, it may be

said that it differed from the work of the figures behind in being—not the sudden exceptional song of a man touched to ecstasy, but just the voice of a giant speaking.

At once, as a consequence, came an almost purely mechanical difficulty. When men saw poetry passing up to her lectern they had grown accustomed to assume a certain portly mental attitude; the mere sight of verse was enough (is still perhaps in some places) to set the mind involuntarily swaying with a certain grave formality, and the eager quest and recovery and directness of thought stepping with a conversational swing knocked this for a moment out of time. But it was scarcely more than a physiological difficulty, a matter of optical deportment; it was never a misalliance of matter and form, nor yet the diviner difficulty of thought supernaturally swift. It was simply that the voice was more frank and convivial than the mood which its environment summoned up. The reader's eye wanted time to readjust itself—nothing more. The interval has been granted it, and now it falls into step automatically. And there you have one of the simpler ways in which Browning's friendly humanity made him seem bizarre.

And helping it, scarcely less superficial, there was another difficulty, half-dead too by now, which ought to be mentioned and dismissed. *Sibrandus Schafneburgensis; Johannes Ceutonicus; Mic. Toxetis, Onomastica; Her. Tom. Agrippa, De Occult Philosoph.* Consternation may well have seized plain minds when they saw poetry sprinkled with names like these. But we know now (it is the mocking conclusion which heavy research now finds itself facing askance) that these titles really testify, not to anything monstrous or fantastic in the way of learning, but to a kind of fireside simplicity and homeliness. They are only the names young Browning picked out of the books that

were his nursery toys. Paracelsus, for instance, was his father's pet hobby. To make rhymes about the Piper of Hamelin was almost an established family game. The more we learn of his life the plainer do we see that his air of dangerous abstruseness is largely due to a kind of domestic economy, to the sensible practice, which he maintained to the end of his life, of using the material that lay nearest to his hand.

But these are minor matters after all. Like his later levities—his willingness to guy his critics, to scribble ribaldry on the tabernacle walls of his verse, to out-Browning Browning and to live up to—and beyond—his reputation; they are just offshoots and illustrations of a yet more profoundly wholesome and philistine quality—his inability, that is, to see poetry as anything but a tool, a useful subordinate to life, to be treated like a servant. He could never be one of those who crush their lives to produce the wine of their art. He would never sell himself for a new song. And this sterling refusal to allow life to approach art with salaams flustered his fellow-philistines in all sorts of curious ways. One of the most interesting relates to the notorious difficulty of *Sordello*—the "mountain of unintelligibilities." When he wrote it, in his twenties, he was indeed determined to succeed as a poet, but only as part of his programme for making a thorough success of the larger business of life; and when he took up his pen it was less to learn how to write than to learn how to act and eat and comport himself. In it, and in *Paracelsus* and *Pauline*, those companion-studies of "aspiring souls," you see him using poetry—not only to educate his faculties gymnastically, as Sordello did—

> Fondling, in turn of fancy, verse; the Art
> Developing his soul a thousand ways—

but actually to work out his position, map out his life, make a rough trial draft of his career, a private rehearsal, and cast a sort of horoscope. It is usual to praise *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* for "the completeness with which they portray remote historical personages." The hero of each certainly is an historical personage. But he was not born before May 7, 1812. These sketches are not retrospects, they are prospects—are, in fact, prospectuses—preliminary announcements of the proposed extensive development of the going concern called Robert Browning. It is just here that we young bloods of to-day are perhaps a little unfair to our elders. We forget that in their time, when the clear-cut aiguilles and gullies of the *Dramatic Lyrics* were still in the clouds, there was only one route up Browning, and that was over the vast slithering slopes of *Sordello*. Nowadays, if we read it at all, it is on our descent, confidently skipping and glissading—slurring the difficulties light-heartedly, sustained by our knowledge of the peak. But to tackle it as Tennyson and Ruskin did, working heavily up into the unknown, is still to find *Sordello* pretty stiff. "Hard, very hard, it undoubtedly is," even that keen climber Mr. Symons has openly admitted. Yet not, as he suggested, for its "cragginess." It is scree—that is the difficulty; the debris of his wander-year, made out of his changing moods and impressions, the stuff he quarried as he went seeking the Philosopher's Stone. And if the litter is thus due to a kind of canny level-headedness, to a dedication of poetry to the service of his life instead of his life to the service of poetry, there was something even more magnificently practical to follow. Like some emperor of old at the mouth of a dubious labyrinth, he had sent in these creatures of his, Paracelsus and Sordello, in advance, in order to test the way. Both expired,

painfully. But each, before the end, gasped out a certain piece of advice. "Regard me," says the dying Paracelsus—

> Regard me and the poet dead long ago,
> Who loved too rashly—and shape forth a third
> And better-tempered spirit, warned by both.

The life of the intellect, urged both, must be balanced by some exterior devotion; egoism unlinked with love means horrid dooms. So said these Browning *manqués*. We know how he took the warning. The second half of *Paracelsus*, as inspection makes clear, is just an empty shell, a dummy, stuck on for the sake of symmetry. The true conclusion was not effected until that brave September morning of 1846 when the poet swept down upon 50, Wimpole Street —snatched Miss Barrett out of her darkened room, heavy with opiates—and away to Florence and the sun-sluiced Apennines:

> I have gained her!
> Her soul's mine, and now, grown perfect,
> I shall pass my life's remainder.

Perfection! Was it really that? We can only guess at the alternatives: who shall say? Yet one or two points, apt to our main argument, cannot be concealed. It is plain, to begin with, that it was this practical attitude towards poetry, continued in his later work, that both gained him his intimidating title of philosopher and robbed him of any real right to it. He was no true speculator, in spite of his followers: all he sought was a safe investment for his time. Long before Harvard had invented the word he was only a pragmatist. His Rabbi Ben Ezras and Blougrams and Karshish are all agents

acting on his behalf, sent out to find him the Elixir if they can. Far more a physician than a metaphysician, he delights in discussing the problems of the body, and sees the soul as a superior drug or stimulus, a medicine for the man who encloses it—not greatly different in character from the large restoratives of arts or gems or seas. If renunciation is recommended, it is only that the world may be more perfectly won. It is the conqueror's code, not the prophet's—the voice of the visible world. His judgments are those of the fireside and the club (though a good club, of course, and a bright fireside). You can give some of these earthly songs a heavenly meaning if you will:—

> Then welcome each rebuff
> That turns earth's smoothness rough,
> Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
> Be our joys three parts pain!
> Strive and hold cheap the strain;
> Lean, nor account the pang; dare, never judge the throe.

But though you fill it with mystical wine the cup is still of clay—good, red clay. An icier and exacter philosophy, for instance, would perhaps have judged less cruelly those lovers in *The Statue and the Bust*, still seeing in their frustration a fine achievement, fitly symbolized by the more enduring beauty of the marble and the bronze. The earthly love Sordello urged remains the supreme ideal, rarely even made a symbol of the finer devotions to which it has sometimes—has it not?—to be sacrificed, a devotion that knows nothing of sex. Even from Luria, his supreme renunciant, he never dares demand that sacrifice. It was perhaps the abnegation Browning dreaded his calculations to commend. Perhaps he instinctively falsified the crystal For it has to be remembered

— though it rarely is — that his fifteen superb married years were, poetically, the most barren of his life, that it was in his years of desirous youth and aching widowerhood that his best work was done.

But this is not the occasion to put such questions, to ask whether there may not have been a misappropriation of poetic capital. And our dividend —even if we do not count the compensation to be got from the sight of his love-affair, rounded and radiant as a myth—is already high. These limitations made him an incomplete philosopher and an imperfect dramatist, but they made him a model man. They are the lines that frame the picture. Restrained on the one hand from sitting beside Shelley, on the other from a seat by Shakspere, he is left ruler of a midway kingdom, made our chief poet of familiar life. He is the Laureate of life in undress, of life emulous and muscular and mirthful. All the physical satisfactions—of touch, sight, taste, and sound—are rendered here irresistibly. The best drinking-songs in the language are here, and the best riding-songs, and some of our best rhymed tales. All the treasures, fruits, and gems of the world are fingered for us with a satisfying voluptuousness; the lines are littered with loot, heaped like a pirate's hold; we prowl in an Aladdin's Cave. And the rich sounds of life echo here too. From bee's kiss to thunderclap he can race up the full scale, missing never a note, and then come rippling back again through the semi-tones of art, from Abt Vogler's to Galuppi's. Who has painted us better landscapes and seascapes or such curtains of sunset and dawn? With Swinburne he can rejoice simultaneously in the boom and lash of the living wave and the kiss and lilt of the line that records it. And, unlike the poets of nature, he sees the country as but a pedestal to the town, as

part of that wide apparatus of life which it is man's business to learn how to use. It was from this safe, normal centre that he drew his arch, the full rainbow of earthly reassurances, and it was thus that he became, at his zenith, the supreme celebrant in our time of the ultimate solace of love.

Higher than that he does not go; it is the keystone of his arch. The transcendentalism of which we used to hear so much is merely the vapour on which the prism was cast; its very weakness, as we have seen, was woven up with the strength of his life—it was just because it was of the earth, watery, that it reflected the divine colours so well. There are still solemn persons, it is true, stout sons of their fathers, who will insist on going out, with little clattering pails, and returning to us proudly with indubitable rain-water—which they assure us is the very blood and essence of the bow. Dear, queer, estimable people! "Does Browning urge this?" they ask; and "Did he mean us to regard the other?"; and go gathering maxims in his poems—gleaning fossils in a field of corn and poppies. How much they would have us miss! One instance, a central one, to end with. "Entirely honest merchant" that he was, Browning shows in nothing the hearty simplicity of his nature so well as in his uneasy anxiety to convince himself that he is doing something more than merely sing. *Pippa* itself, as is too rarely recognized, is just an attempt to prove the practical value of song, the material importance of the poet; so, of course, is *Saul*. He felt fidgety without a tangible purpose—and so would often self-deceptively assuage his sterling conscience by budding his roses on solid intellectual trunks. If he painted a landscape he must have a stout peg to hang it on—and then a wall to justify the nail—and then a house for the wall—and there, in a winking, you

have a humming community of hastily banded and organized theories. His skill at this kind of swift buttressing was superb—and to fail to perceive that it is improvisation is not only to overestimate their solidity rather dangerously but to miss, as well, more lamentably, the high sport of watching rapid cunning and resource in full cry. He could twist anything into a stanza; somewhere in his exact and abounding memory he could always pounce upon some alloy of epithet or incident which made the perfect amalgam. Examples are everywhere: *Dramatis Personæ* is full of them; for one of the daintier instances turn to *Love in a Gondola*, where a casual pot-pourri of petals is so safely compressed and so craftily tinted that it looks like a dense group in bronze. Much of the "cragginess" of his later work is only the result of his desire for plenty of rifts to load with ore. Sometimes, of course, he did tackle stubborn trees of thought out of a sheer lad's love of climbing. But most often he is only using them as Christmas-trees to hang with little lamps and gems and precious toys.

Not to realize that is to sell your Christmas-tree for firewood, to spend your time painfully struggling up a maypole instead of catching its ribands and joining the dance. It is the last word to be said to-day—a warning and a salute. Approach Browning solemnly, with a frown of perplexity, and he will frown back at you fiercely. But come to him heartily, as convivially as he came to verse, and you find him speaking in your own vernacular, dealing more directly with your humble troubles, hopes, and appetites—good leg-of-mutton poet that he is—than any other singer of our age. He has been held captive too long by those dark banditti, the Browningites. Let us hail him now as the poet for plain people, for honest, friendly souls like you and me. The wise

Landor saw that long ago, when he linked him with an earlier democrat:—

> Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
> No man hath walk'd along our roads with step
> So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
> So varied in discourse.

But even Landor's tribute has been outdone, in fundamental completeness, by the proud testimony of Lockhart. It is the perfect exposition of his secret. Let it stand for peroration here. "I like Browning," said he. "He's not the least bit like one of your damned literary men." *Ave!*

*Liverpool Courier*, 1912.

# THE FIRST MORRIS

NOTE.—*William Morris's first book,* The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems, *was published in* 1858. *Morris, that is to say, was only twenty-four, and most of the poems were written during his undergraduate days, when he was but a puzzled and tempestuous schoolboy. None the less, as most readers have felt, it is not only by far the most magical of his books, thrilled and pierced by a troubled, strange beauty that never reappears in his work (and that is, indeed, unique in English letters); but it also continually seems to display a rare gift for curious psychology, an astonishing comprehension of obscure moods of the soul, which the after-years proved plainly to be precisely the talent which Morris most markedly lacked. Wholesome, simple, nobly balanced, Morris's later work is; but its characterization is as naïve as his simple social theories were, as free as they from any understanding or appreciation of individuals. The books he wrote as a man have always a sweet childishness: yet the book he wrote when a boy reflects a wisdom almost sinister. When he closed* The Defence *he seemed to snap a lock on the genius that produced it.*"

*These anomalies, taken together, make up a phenomenon that is probably, both humanly and technically, the most intriguingly perverse and apparently incomprehensible which the recent course of our major literature provides. The pages that follow represent an effort to discover the secret cause of it, without falling back on such stop-gap terms as "inspiration," "intuition." The method pursued has been the patient one of the impressionist. The exact emotional effect of* The Defence *volume is first of all defined; the various elements in this effect are then traced back to their separate sources; these, next, are successively related to the schoolboy's personality so that all that is involuntary, unintentional, lies revealed; and though the practical deduction (in both senses) which is thus made possible involves much that is distinctly disturbing (an accusation of cowardice, for instance, against the later Morris, and of a disappointing innocence in the earlier) it does at the same time seem to invest the whole queer occultation with a quality of quiet human logic—which is, after all, much more reassuring than ideals left intact but unexplained.*

## I

MORRIS'S first book begins with a "*But*"—

> But knowing now that they would have her speak—

and the odd, abrupt jerk of the opening might have been the jar of a delicate lever — disturbing the

"values" of poetry—altering its relations—twitching into a new, sharper perspective the lines of the country into which, through the lattice of letters, the mind of the reader had been accustomed to peer. Now, for a little, quite utterly, the atmosphere of earth ebbs away; and across the drained emptiness the colours leap upon the senses with the parched, uncanny emphasis of dream. It is the brittle atmosphere of fever, prismatic but awry: distance is abolished, details loom relentlessly, little noises, unnoticed before—sighs, rustlings, the tapping of a pulse, the involuntary whisperings of loosened hair—wax and swell until their beating fills the brain:—

> "——let the clock tick, tick
> To my unhappy pulse that beats right through
> My eager body."

A binding heat is on all things; and the figures that walk in this airless region seem to move with strangled limbs, as though plucked and stilled by some invisible tension, using the awkward gestures of the overstrung:—

> But knowing now that they would have her speak,
> She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
> Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,
>
> As though she had had there a shameful blow,
> And feeling it shameful to feel aught but shame
> All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,
>
> She must a little touch it; like one lame
> She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head
> Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame
>
> The tears dried quick; she stopped at last and said:
> "O knights and lords . . ."

And their speech, when it does come, has the same laboured stiffness. They use words with a stumbling intensity, each syllable patiently articulated but all the stresses misplaced, with an effect half-childish, as of people who talk with numb lips. Not otherwise would words fall, uttered in an actual void—each a flake of dead sound, congealing as it comes, leaving no echoes or vibrations to ease the entrance of the next:—

> "O knights and lords, it seems but little skill
> To talk of well-known things past now and dead.
>
> God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
> And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
> Because you must be right, such great lords; still . . .

In these sentences, as in the scene itself, there are no planes or modulations: every syllable, down to the slightest, is wrung up to one raw pitch. And this unrelaxing siege of the senses and hectic confusion of values is heightened and intensified further by the intrinsic nature of the words. For each stands for something as bright and solid as the speakers, as palpable as the lips through which they force their way. They trail no audible murmurs to loiter in the memory, and blend and melt and dwindle there; instead, they stamp the page with a visible pattern that hangs instantly and unremittingly before the mind. The appeal is unsparingly optical:—

> "Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
> And you were quite alone and very weak:
> Yea, laid a-dying while very mightily
>
> The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
> Of river through your broad lands running well:
> Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak,

'One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever, which they be
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell

Of your own strength and mightiness; here, see!'
Yea, yea, my lord, and you to ope your eyes,
At foot of your familiar bed to see

A great God's angel standing, with such dyes,
Not known on earth, on his great wings, and hands,
Held out two ways, light from the inner skies

Showing him well, and making his commands
Seem to be God's commands, moreover, too,
Holding within his hands the cloths on wands;

And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red . . ."

Thought is a colour, anguish a painted emblem; and even the customary veils and soft remissions of metaphor are abolished, so that the imagery starts into the foreground, and ranks inseparably among the real. Even the strange vocal stress of the utterance helps, curiously, to increase this visual poignancy: for the rigour of the voices, being unvarying, seems to reduce the language to a colourless medium, a neutral lens through which the sight slips unaware. All the duties of comprehension devolve upon the eye: thought has become pure vision.

The effect upon the reader's mind is strange. Dizzied by this ceaseless play upon one nerve—half-drugged and half-excited by the level drilling of the litany-like metre—deprived of all intellectual food yet pierced and lit by vivid apprehensions—it tastes a rare mixture of exultation and quiescence, passes into a state akin to trance. It is a condition that has a real resemblance to the contemplative ecstasy of the mystic. The senses, receiving registrations of such sharpness, seem to be

displaying that preternatural activity, that heightened acuteness of perception, which possesses the body at moments of crisis, the signal of an exalted mood. It needs but a touch to complete the illusion, to make it all but reality. The touch is not withheld. A sacring-bell rings sharply, the Grail glimmers through the forest, "images of wonder" submit the choosing-cloths of doom. The chant of the verse goes on like the voice of a priest. The light that falls on the page is that of a painted window. On all sides we see none but the strained abrupt gestures of people wrought by a profound spiritual tension. These bowed knights and burdened queens, moving with the awkwardness of anchorites, seem the servers of a mystery too great to be entrusted to their words. It is impossible not to believe that we are the witnesses of a supreme ceremonial. And when, with Galahad, we watch the bright shrivelling and concentration of all bodily things—

> "As I sat there not moving, less and less
> I saw the melted snow that hung in beads
> Upon my steel-shoes; less and less I saw
> Between the tiles the bunches of small weeds"—

we feel we are participants too; that for us also the scroll is about to part and the earth to crumple into a sign.

II

It is true that as the pages turn, and the book progresses, there are many changes of ostensible motive: *The Defence* gives place to a battle-piece; love-songs, lonely ballads, lyrics of a sweet helplessness follow; but this sense of mystery, of revelation, endures unchallenged—as implicit in a lost refrain:—

*Two red roses across the moon;*

or in a broken carol:—

> Ships sail through the heaven
> With red banners dress'd,
> Carrying the planets seven
> To see the white breast;
> (*Mariæ Virginis*)

or a portrait:—

> My lady seems of ivory,
> Forehead, straight nose, and cheeks that be
> Hollow'd a little mournfully;

or in the picture of Jehane's racked lips, aching with love, as in the record of Galahad's vigil. Perhaps a certain simple cunning in the arrangement of the book aids the painted quality of its appeal to secure this high conformity. The pieces toward the end, that is to say, are certainly the palest and weakest; and thus the eye, when it reaches them, comes enriched with the sacramental colours it has gathered on the way, and weaves the rose-girdled moons and the wan, meek hands, and even the burning towers, into one hieratic vestment and sees them as part of a mystical heraldry. The dyes from the great wings on the opening page soak through to the last, giving each its celestial stain.

And the painted memory of Guenevere's agony, similarly enduring, helps to purge the sunbright scenes that follow of their sensuousness. Here, ostensibly, in pleasances and bowers, are none but lovers fevered with desire; yet the hungry hands and the lips parched for kisses affect us like the wrung features of ascetics, tortured for holy ends. The passion that racks Jehane seems by its very physical fierceness to burn away the sense of the body and set the spirit free:—

> No answer through the moonlit night;
> No answer in the cold grey dawn;
> No answer when the shaven lawn
> Grew green, and all the roses bright.

Her tired feet look'd cold and thin,
  Her lips were twitch'd, and wretched tears,
  Some, as she lay, roll'd past her ears,
Some fell from off her quivering chin.

Her long throat, stretched to its full length,
  Rose up and fell right brokenly;
  As though the unhappy heart was nigh
Striving to break with all its strength.

To this poor mortal, as to her namesake, "tortured by vain desire" amidst the floods, passion comes as cruelly as to Guenevere, confessedly anguished by remorse. The love that enters here is always the love that "hurts and makes afraid and wastes"; and so, for us, it assumes the aspect of a flagellant, actually scourging out the desires of the flesh.

And this strange annihilation of the body by its own eagerness, an eagerness that mounts into an ecstasy that consumes all but the pure flame of desire, is but one part of a larger or a nearer process of which it may be taken as an emblem. For throughout this book, on every plane, the very brightness of the beauty seems to burn away its earthly body. Just as the concentrated colours of a landscape may be used to stain a window meant to teach the instability of earthly beauty and to cloister up men's minds, so do these vivid courts and gardens seal us in an atmosphere of ritual, their special pagan clarity and brightness appearing not only to testify to the spirit's impassioned exaltation, but also to turn the flowers and vestments into emblems of that supernal beauty, beyond the barriers of sense, only to be attained by their destruction, which is the reward of the frustration of the flesh. It seems so plain that the emotions that sweep us must come from a source superior to æsthetics, transcending knowledge itself. We are certainly not being lulled by mere music: the noise these words make is nothing, a

mere tuneless intonation. Nor is it any tale that delights us; nor a useful text; nor the prettiness of conceit. As the green and crimson figures crowd about us, the verse that brings them is wholly forgotten. It is by the movement of these painted characters, a code superior to language, that the unspeakable message is made clear. We have crossed the bridges that divide symbol from reality and know that they have dissolved as we passed. We are absorbed into the very stuff of metaphor, and inhabit a wisdom above words. The elusive magic that verse has hitherto practised capriciously, the spell that floats from a lyrical cry or gleams in a solitary phrase, has here been caught up and sustained and built unalloyed into an enduring substance. Poetry at last has justified our instinctive faith in her and fulfilled her undefined pledge; now at last we enter, with Blake, into "Noah's rainbow, and become the friends and companions of the images of wonder. . . ."

III

And then—the spell snaps. To turn the last page of *Guenevere* is to let the little lever slip back—Click!—out we slide, irretrievably, into the old, placid, amiable sunlight and the reassuring conventions. It is a recoil as complete as from moonlight to noonlight—from the lovely delirium of fever to the cool languors of convalescence; it is one of the most astonishing zigzags in letters. With *Guenevere* we seemed to have crossed the "perilous seas," to have pierced their foam finally; with *Jason*, Morris's next book, we are back on the safe, hither side of them, the ripe, comforting earth, with its fruits and its fatness, banked between us and all questionable things:—

> And southward is a gentle sea and kind
> Nigh landlocked, peopled with all kinds of fish,
> And the good land yields all that man can wish.

If *Guenevere* acts like a drug, stringing the nerves to a state of tingling clairvoyance, then *Jason* soothes them like an opiate, a nepenthe compounded of low, flitting colours, and lulling tunes, and the herbs of gathered tales. It is one of the longest sleeping-draughts in the language. Instead of the startling utterance of the first book, "its accent falling in strange unwonted places," as Pater said, "with the effect of a great cry," we have the prolonged sleepy lapping of a metre that flows like a lullaby, like the murmur on a midsummer beach, the very accent of earthly content:—

> . . . Then Jason paused and said:
> "O Jove, by thy hand may all these be led
> To name and wealth, and yet indeed for me,
> What happy ending shall I ask from thee?
> What helpful friends? What length of quiet years?
> What freedom from ill cares and deadly fears?
> Do what thou wilt, and none the less believe
> That all these things and more shouldst thou receive
> If thou wert Jason, I were Jove to-day."

So the equable iambics flow, whilst the heroes haggle courteously with heaven. For it is no mystic Sangraal that Jason and these Argonauts pursue—they have nothing even of Sir Peter Harpdon's love of battle for battle's sake; they fight frankly for peace, they work only to win ease—"length of quiet years," "wealth of happy days"; and they like their voyage to be well guaranteed. In this, as in all else, they are gently in accord. The sharp delineations in the earlier book—the faces so intensely discriminated that they seem to betray the last secrets of

the mind—have all been smoothed down and simplified, as though by an actual tide; and character is to be distinguished from character only by the colours of their robes, their blue eyes or their grey—never by traits of temper or desire. And love itself moves among them, no longer a lord of terrible aspect, but dimpled and pouting, cherubic, a pretty matter of blushes and sighs:—

> Therewith she made an end; but while she spoke
> Came Love unseen and cast his golden yoke
> About them both, and sweeter her voice grew,
> And softer ever, as betwixt them flew,
> With fluttering wings, the new-born strong desire;
> And when her eyes met his grey eyes, on fire
> With that that burned her, then with sweet new shame
> Her fair face reddened, and there went and came
> Delicious tremors through her. . . .

And so on—pure sugar and sentiment. Character and emotion are naïvely conventionalized; the writer seems as unaware of individualities as a child. In the whole of *The Life and Death of Jason*; in all the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*; in the prose romances that followed these and the social theories they accompanied; in all Morris's work, in short, from now until he died, there is never the faintest sign of the possession by the poet of that gift of almost unhuman understanding of human nature, of its intricate passions and exotic, fierce moods, which seemed to enable him, in this first book, to follow Guenevere's agony unremittingly through shade after shade—using it, like some Inquisitor acting on behalf of the rest of us, to extort new knowledge of the darker places of the soul and discover the last secrets of desire.

What caused this recoil? It is a question that has never yet been answered. My own first idea was

that it was an actual retreat—a panic-stricken withdrawal from the dubious borderland where the first book was written; and I still feel there is much truth in this view. One remembers the mixed strain of Morris's blood—half Celtic, half Saxon (he was a Welshman of the Marches)—one remembers, too, the strange childlike fear of death which constantly haunted him, only passing from him at the very end of his life; and it then becomes difficult not to perceive in this first revulsion the opening stage of a stumbling flight from the questionable shapes of the borderland, from the occult beauty to which one side of his genius held the key, towards the reassuring sunlight and simple strength of solid earth. The fighters in the first book follow the mystical Grail, their swords hack out a path that leaps away from life; but Jason and his comrades are permitted to seek the earth's riches only, they fight in order to hold death at bay. They brought their maker all the bright symbols of bodily abundance, they filled his pages with the reassuring colours of fruits and crops and flowers. And even this did not suffice. He must substantiate these dreams. He must carve them in oak and clamp them with metal. He must copy out his visions of tangible beauty in something more tangible than words—in actual ores and beams and fabrics. And finally, as he heaped up, half desperately, these futile defences against the outer dark, like a man trying to build a bastion about the sweetness of spring, he came into contact with the most living and most mortal of earthly fabrics—with the bodies of live men and women. And, oddly, that contact brought him peace. A new serenity (we are told) crept into his life, a new sweetness and humanity. His work as a reformer may have shortened his life—but it seems splendidly certain it killed his fear of death. Like a child crying in the night he stretched his

hands through the darkness for protection. They touched responsive fingers, frailest of support—but the touch sufficed. Like a child soothed by the touch, he turned contentedly to sleep—

> I am old and have seen
> Many things that have been;
> Both grief and peace
> And wane and increase.
> No fate I tell
> Of ill or well,
> But this I say:
> Night treadeth on day,
> And for worst and best—
> Right good is rest.

Yes—there is much to be said for this conception of a twofold Morris, one side of him terrified by the twilight paths that tempted the other; it explains, for one thing, that queer passion of his for Iceland which perplexed Burne-Jones and Rossetti so sorely, but which yielded him his second masterpiece, *Sigurd*. For in that land of mingled noon and night, of snow-fields and secret fires, of monstrous dreams and dread imaginings united quite simply with the innocent ways of a pastoral people, he found the perfect responding paradox to the contradictions of his own nature and could give his entire genius full play. The sunny Saxon craving, on the one hand, for feasting and stout blows and Socialism and big blue-eyed men with golden beards; and the furtive but perhaps profounder longing, on the other hand, for twilit moods and wizard kingdoms, somewhere away west of the moon, beyond the forbidden drawbridges of dream—both found in *Sigurd* a simultaneous solace. All the strands of his various nature come together in that gigantic poem and are twisted in one everlasting knot.

But even so the mystery of *Guenevere* is only half dispelled. We still have to account for its uncanny wisdom and glittering power. For ranged round the problem, deepening its shadows tremendously, stand certain fixed facts of biography. Morris was barely more than a boy when he wrote *Guenevere*; *Jason* was the work of his manhood. A nine-years interval lay between the two, years of singularly gracious growth, of a continually increasing mastery both of art and of life. The book that seems boyish, that is to say, was born of experience and proud purpose; while the one that seems weighted by an almost troubling wisdom was written by a bungling undergraduate. "These early poems," says Mr. Mackail very beautifully, "have the evanescent and intangible grace of a new beginning in art, the keen scent and frail beauty of the first blossoms of spring. . . . Such in their time had been the troubled and piercing charm of the Virgilian 'Eclogues,' of the early Florentine or Sienese paintings." "When Morris read his first poem, the first he had written in his life," says another fine critic, himself a poet, who was happy enough to form one of the eager Oxford circle, "I felt it was something the like of which had never been heard before. It was a thing entirely new, founded on nothing previous. . . ." Side by side with these utterances, it is good to place Morris's own comment. When the hushed group of listeners had breathed their applause—"Well, if that's poetry," said he, "it's jolly easy to do."

## IV

So—who fished the murex up? How was this first effect produced—so "easy," so abnormal, so irrecoverable? And what caused the change? Criticism, in part the docile registrar, meekly making definitions

and entering results, does like to be regarded too as a subtle discoverer of causes—and of causes, often, as she is pleasantly persuaded, that are cunningly hidden from the artist himself. An illusion, perhaps, but it serves to keep her to the duller task, makes amends for the drudgery : for probably nothing in all letters is more absorbing, more exciting, than the sight of the Spirit of Letters (as it seems) duping her prey, the poor writer, with old baits and ambitions, playing him softly, till at length she wrings out just the service she required and he lies neatly gutted on the bank, performer of a very different service to the scheme of things from that which he proposed when first he spread his little fins. She has Bedford gaol for one man and blindness for another; tricks a Fitzgerald with loneliness into whimsical hobbies; turns an angry letter to the *Times* into a ten-year book called *Modern Painters*; sets a Blake pursuing phantoms with cries that became happy carols in mid-air. These are random figures, but are they not typical? From Spenser (with his politics) to Pater (with his Winckelmann) they all work with enchanted ink that changes as it dries; they believe themselves to be writing one message and quite another reaches us; they leave the world gratefully in their debt for something which they had neither knowledge nor intention of bestowing. Or so at least Criticism—perhaps duped in her turn?—is delighted to suppose.

Yet certainly this case of Morris, whom we may know better than the Langlands, not only warms up the belief with new colour, but actually increases its attractiveness, screwing up the dramatic pitch some points further. Mostly, the Spirit of Letters (or, more strictly, of course, some obscure dæmon in the man himself, the deep, dim essence of his genius) gets its way: not often meeting a man both strong enough to stand to his principles without

being broken and too innocent to be seduced by gallantries. But Morris—half Berserker, half babe—had both the strength and the simplicity; and the tale of his life, broadly scanned, resolves itself into a long wrestle with his dæmon, a match between the comfortable methods that appealed to his plain mind and the cryptic plans of this masked power. He won—we lost; and all his eagerness to share his prize, and the handsome figure he cut as he received it, rich consolations though they are, must not prevent us from frankly realizing our ill-fortune. *Guenevere* is the golden, tantalizing proof of it. Wrung from him when he was still dizzy with youth, before he had found his footing and learned his rights and resources, *The Defence of Guenevere* is a victory for the powers he was later to subdue. An involuntary cry, it lets his secret slip. It shows the message he was charged to deliver but which he shrank from and smoothly suppressed. *Guenevere* declares the poet Morris refused to become.

This is not mere hyperbole. Much of *Jason's* mildness is directly the result of Morris's increased powers of craftsmanship and his increased mastery of life; and the special quality of *Guenevere*, the rare, high note that makes it magical, did steal into it, as we are now to see, quite without Morris's consent—even without his knowledge—actually invalidating his deliberate design. It may sound fantastic, but it is circumstantially true, that he was one of the few readers of the book who failed to understand its significance. It is a matter of record that he never liked it; that he deliberately destroyed a bundle of contemporary verse, veined with the same quality; that he consented to the publication of a second edition with extreme reluctance and only on condition that he was allowed to revise and reshape it; and it is in the deliberate, cool adjust-

ments he made for this purpose that we may find, I think, the clinching proof of his illusion and our first real clue to its character. The alterations, happily for us, failed to reach the printer;[1] but some of them were recently discovered, and these have now been reproduced, by Miss May Morris, among her discreet and charming Editorial Notes to the comely new Complete Edition.[2] One set, typical of all, may be submitted here. They relate to "The Chapel in Lyoness." Of the verses below, those on the left give Sir Galahad's speech as it was originally written (and as it still appears in the current editions); those on the right are the stanzas into which Morris, seventeen years later, no longer at the mercy of mere instincts, carefully re-cut them:—

So I went a little space
From out the chapel, bathed my face
In the stream that runs apace
By the churchyard wall.

So I went a little space
From out the chapel, bathed my face
Amid the stream that runs apace
By the churchyard wall.

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[1] It was accident again, it seems, that intervened and saved us. And it is worth noticing, too, that even the shivering abruptness of that opening "But" was produced by an involuntary breakage. Morris himself meant the book to begin, quite smoothly and conventionally, with—

> That summer morning out in the green field
> Along the Itchen, sat King Arthur's knight—

an introduction as tranquil as "Once upon a time." But this opening was somehow snapped off (Miss Morris recently found it among the litter of her father's workshop) and it was the second page of the MS. that became the first in the printed book.

[2] *The Collected Works of William Morris;* with Introductions by his daughter, May Morris. In xxiv vols. (Longmans.)

There I plucked a faint wild rose,
Hard by where the linden grows,
Sighing over silver rows
Of the lilies tall.

I laid the flower across his mouth;
The sparkling drops seem'd good for drouth;
He smiled, turn'd round towards the south,
Held up a golden tress.

There in my rest I plucked a rose
Where neath the lime a garden blows
And winds run through the trembling rows
Of lilies slim and tall.

I bore him water for his drouth,
I laid the flower beside his mouth,
He smiled, turned round towards the south,
Held up a golden tress.

Is it not amazing? It would be difficult, with fewer strokes, to dispel the early fascination more completely. Follow them. First come the melodic amendments—a general smoothing and tidying of the rhythm: a short line padded with an extra syllable (*amid* for *in*), a stiff line (*Hard by where the linden grows*) oiled and curved and given the conventional wave; the joints between syllable and syllable nicely softened and salved, until at length all the old numb naïveté and ache of the accent has been quite worked away, and with it all sense of spiritual tension and distress. Next, neatly coincident, but carrying the work of suave destruction into still subtler crevices, come the soft changes in the scene. The erasure of *faint* and *wild* instantly cools the light fever in the first effect; the new decorative slimness of the lilies makes them a mere ornament; and the introduction of the *garden*, the substitution of the benignant *limes* for the shuddering *lindens*, safely lowers the whole dream-landscape into something as contented and subdued as the orchard-close at Kelmscott. Remains now, of the first hectic picture, nothing but the queer morbid stain of the flower on the dead man's

mouth; and the last stanza smoothly assuages it. The rose is gently displaced, the half-mystical gesture which laid it there is turned into an amiable act of knightly ministration. We are left with a graceful description of a credible incident—it is exactly as though a picture by the popular artist who painted "The Knight Errant" had been substituted for one by the master of the same name who painted the "Lorenzo and Isabella."

It is a curious bit of restoration, and, at first, unmistakably disconcerting; it seems to throw a doubt upon the authenticity of the spell; if the stumbling tension in the voices, for instance, which seemed to hint at an unspeakable burden, was merely a result of the workman's awkwardness, are we not hoaxing ourselves rather absurdly when we allow it to thrill us so profoundly? Nor may we use those seventeen years as a shield. Morris's hands had gained strength in the interval, they could carry out his plans more completely—but that was all; there seems no doubt that the picture on the right was the one he always wanted to paint, that it was upon a graceful description of a credible incident that he believed himself to be engaged, and that even when the lines were actively shrilling and sharpening beneath his fingers into the shapes we know, he still felt he was producing work of a blameless virility. For this we have his own assurance. Asked, in the early days, whom he thought his work most resembled, "Why, Browning, I suppose," said he, surprised; and when some rapt disciple besought him to expound the inner meaning of the symbol

*Three red roses across the moon,*

he blurted out indignantly, "But it's the knight's coat-of-arms, of course!" These are remarkable asser-

tions. No other reader, we may be sure, ever connected that mesmeric rune with clanking steel; or realized that the book was to be regarded as a new series of *Dramatic Lyrics*. Victorian literature was a various mother, but few of her children were less alike than Pippa and the two Jehanes, or Blougram and Sir Bors; and the contrast between the spurting idiom that describes the first, a spangled riot of mad neologisms, pouring helter-skelter from all sorts of newly-picked pockets—the novelist's jargon fired into ecstasy—and the primitive epithets, laboriously strung, that spell out the portraits of the others, is barely wide enough to measure the difference between the temper of the curiosities that created them.

Yet Morris was perfectly sincere in his ascription; he offered it in absolute good faith. With a little adjustment, indeed, by looking at them afresh from a certain angle, it is possible even for us to decipher a sort of buried Browning motive at the back of many of these pieces, glimmering to the surface, as we peer, much as an old fresco will gleam through later washes. Approach *The Defence* retrospectively—looking at it, not in square isolation, but down the long, slanting, resonant aisle of Morris's robust later activities—his hearty socialism, his ringing sagas, his clattering looms and printing-presses and solid furniture—and you do begin to see the old sturdy intention linking up, collecting special patches of colour and salient corners, shaking off as irrelevances the queer curdled angles and tints that we took for the main design. The name-poem itself begins to change: Guenevere's plea displays a simple logic, the logic falls into place as part of a well-set stage-scene climbing up to a conventional curtain—the clapping of releasing horse-hoofs "off"; and the distraught images that held the sight before fall back, emptied of moment revealed as minor details that bad drawing had swollen

out of scale. In *Sir Peter Harpdon's End*, again, it is no longer the strange, feverish, chattering keen of the countess :—

> "Come face to face,
> O Christ, that I may clasp your knees and pray
> I know not what, at any rate come now
> From one of the many places where you are,
> Either in Heaven amid thick angel wings
> Or sitting on the altar strange with gems
> Or high up in the dustiness of the apse—
> Let us go You and I a long way off
> To the little damp dark Poitevin church.
> While you sit on the coffin in the dark
> Will I lie down my face on the bare stone" . . .

that rings and drones most insistently in our ears. It is drowned by the sound of the arbalests, the hot hammer-and-tongs work beneath the walls, and by Clisson's noble snarl:

> "You filthy beast, stand back and let him go,
> Or by God's eyes I'll choke you!"

From all the Froissart poems a similar new manliness looks out. One even sees a sunny purpose at the back of the dubious films of *Geffray Teste Noire* —sees that its base is a composition as frank and genial as anything in Froissart, its colour-scheme the ruby and the gold of wine and noonday sun :—

> We rode a soft pace on that day while spies
> Got news about Sir Geffray; the red wine
> Under the roadside bush was clear; the flies,
> The dragon-flies I mind me most, did shine
> In brighter arms than ever I put on.

It was only some lurking obstinacy in brush or brain that turned these happy colours into the hues of a poisoned dream, the ruby into the red of the frozen blood-pools and the yellow into the sick yellow of the

charnel flames; and that twisted the very wine-cup itself and the bright armour and even the act of drinking into a sinister device:—

> "I saw you drink red wine,
> Once at a feast; how slowly it sank in,
> As though you feared that some wild fate might twine
> Within that cup and slay you for a sin.
>
> I saw you kissing once, like a curved sword
> That bites with all its edge, did your lips lie,
> Curled gently, slowly, long time could afford
> For caught-up breathings: like a dying sigh." . . .

Beardsley rather than Browning, you would say; yet with the example of that restored "Chapel" in front of us it is easy to see how Morris, once his hand was in, would have planed away these twisted aberrations and left the tale as smooth as Edward's beard.

## V

Indeed, there is a danger of our sympathies swinging us too far. The later Morris, all bearded and blithe, radiating legends and hammering down his lusty dogmas ("*Poetry is tommy-rot*," was one of these; and another, more deliberate, "*Half a dozen stanzas of ballad poetry are worth a cart-load of the whining introspective pieces of to-day*"), makes such an entirely satisfying and wholesome figure that the reader may easily be swept off his feet and bullied out of his first priceless impression. Readers *have* yielded thus; nay, Criticism herself has been coerced! "The life of our mediæval ancestors," says one distinguished writer, too close a friend of Morris to resist him, "The life of our mediæval ancestors is here depicted with a sympathy and insight perhaps unparalleled." Even Mr. Andrew Lang was carried away: "We found Froissart's people

alive again in Morris's poems," he was once persuaded to attest, "and we knew better what thoughts and emotions lay in the secrets of their hearts than we could from the bright superficial pages of Froissart."

But we must resist the infection; we are not going to be hectored. If the figures Froissart carved seem to move again in these pages it is with the rude marks and blunders of the mediæval chisel still on their faces and limbs—a race of locomotory effigies, tombs as men walking. The influence of Browning does break into these poems, but it is in the shape of a shattered fierceness, in flakes of raw colour, in lines of a sudden physical violence that twitch the poem like a spasm—such as—

> A wicked smile
> Wrinkled her face, her lips grew thin,
> A long way out she thrust her chin—

which might be a strip torn from a portrait of Ottima and set startlingly on a tapestry—producing an effect as different from the genial heartiness and wide glow of their source as the splintered sunlight stabbing through a thick underwood is unlike the serene spreading radiance outside. From Malory and Froissart young Morris meant, without doubt, to take a certain knightly directness of narrative and stories that rang as they moved. What he actually seized was the numbness that clogs the limbs of his characters, the incoherence of their attitudes and their rigidity—the very qualities that make them move like men locked in a trance. He sought a simple sturdiness and obtained a queer somnambulism. Similarly with Browning. He intended to borrow virility and the heat of human passion. The sudden tensions he took merely filled the air with a monastic fever, heightened the very unreality they were meant to dispel. He mixed his colours carefully, applied them in all confidence—but

somewhere between palette and picture they were doctored, something distorted the brush-marks as they dried.

It smacks prodigiously of sorcery; but we are close on the explanation now. When we turn to consider the effect of the other great influence that is supposed to be projected on these pages we find at first, it is true, what looks disquietingly like yet another of these uncanny perversions. "To my friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti, painter, I dedicate these poems," is the inscription on the fly-leaf of *Guenevere;* and we are assured that over Morris, at the time, the dominion of Rossetti was supreme. "He became not only a pupil, but a servant. Once when Burne-Jones complained that the designs he made in Rossetti's manner seemed better than his own original work, Morris answered with some vehemence: "I have got beyond all that: I want to imitate Gabriel as much as I can." Yet when we turn to look at the resemblance—whither has it fled? Technically, the two poets occupy antipodes. Such verse as this, for instance :—

> What thing unto mine ear
> Wouldst thou convey—what secret thing,
> O wandering water ever whispering?
> Surely thy speech shall be of her.
> Thou water, O thou whispering wanderer,
> What message dost thou bring?

—a whorl of fluted sound, insidiously utilizing the last silken subtleties of onomatopœia, perfectly characteristic of Rossetti—might be used to illustrate precisely those arts of expression which Morris was quite peculiarly incapable of employing. Rossetti loved the very "feel" of language, fingered words with a caressing passion, braiding their echoes like floss. To Morris they were simply so many little blocks, each bearing a coloured sign, which he proceeded to arrange in rows,

unit by unit, until they were built into recognized shapes. All the delicious collusions of which words are capable—the soft cocoons they can spin, out of sound and association, until the legible, logical line has disappeared in a mist of gold—were qualities he never understood. It is curious to compare Morris's *Portrait of My Lady* ("My lady seems of ivory") with Rossetti's companion-piece (*A Portrait*): the first a patient catalogue of features, cut like a cameo, fitted together like the leaded panes of a window; Rossetti's softly evading all outlines and junctures, sliding deliciously through graded elisions, using only the words that hover on the dusky verges of language—moth-like words, twilight words, words that bring dusk on their wings—all the gliding idiom of reverie:—

> In painting her I shrined her face
> 'Mid mystic trees where light falls in
> Hardly at all; a covert place
> Where you might think to find a din
> Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
> Wandering, and many a shape whose name
> Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
> And your own footsteps meeting you,
> And all things going as they came.

This is to make a whispering-gallery of verse, a corridor of stealing echoes and lost sighs. And even when they both enter the borderland of the ballads, where they might be thought to approach one another most nearly, the two men remain marvellously unalike. The bridge that would join *Rapunzel* and *Rose Mary* must leap a full kingdom of emotions. The Welshman's work is as Teutonic as black-letter; as Gothic as a castle on the Rhine. The Italian's is as Celtic as a mountain stream: its stanzas slide as easily as strung opals, the picture mirrored in the heart of each has a magical purity, and yet when all is done, when the last has slipped by, the legend

lies along the memory like a vapour, mixing and melting like a cloud.[1]

[1] Another and yet deeper difference may be noted here: Rossetti's poem is written by a master of narrative; *Rapunzel* is the work of a man who suffered all his life from an utter inability to tell a tale. This is contrary to current opinion of course: it was primarily as a teller of tales that Morris insisted upon being regarded; he believed himself to be the story-teller born; and all his books, from *The Earthly Paradise* to *The Sundering Flood*, could be catalogued in a way that would make them seem credible stout witnesses to that faith. But his gifts were really as unlike Chaucer's (whom he loved to regard as his archetype) as Browning's: and from either of the two main ways of telling a story he was constitutionally barred. There are nine-and-ninety ways of spinning yarns indeed; but though the species are so many, the types are strictly two. On the one hand the art of narrative may concern itself with recounting the progress and evolution of that invisible element, a blend of hints and hopes and possibilities and surprises, which is roughly called the plot: the abstract and impalpable core round which the characters and tangible situations successively cluster. On the other hand it may betray this evolution by presenting, in turn, the only part of its physical envelope which is capable of sympathizing with its changes—by holding up, that is to say, the little mirrors of men's minds in which the invisible fluctuations are legibly reflected. But Morris was spoiled for the first (and elder) of these methods by that curious incapacity of his for dealing with anything abstract or intangible of which we have already seen the signs in these Rossetti comparisons, and which will be more fully demonstrated in a moment. And for the second (which was Browning's and most novelists') he was even more completely disqualified by his queer lack of any psychological gift whatever—the defect which made him seem, all his life, notwithstanding his determined hilarity, so oddly unhuman and isolated, which made one of his dearest friends say sadly that "Morris never seemed really to need us," which was the source of his naïve theories of society, and which turned his one attempt at a novel into what an honest critic (himself) admitted was merely "landscape and sentiment." What he *could* do, better than any one—what the great gift was that gave his soi-disant stories their vivid profusion, persuasiveness, and splendid facility—the page overleaf, at this very moment, is manfully endeavouring to define.

VI

What *did* Morris take from Rossetti, then, and where did he bury his booty? He took things of one special kind—and the contents of the cache, when we discover and open it, flash a keen light on the whole range of his pillagings. There are three poems in *The Defence of Guenevere* whose titles, themes, and accessories are all lifted bodily from Rossetti. They are *The Blue Closet*, *The Tune of the Seven Towers*, and *King Arthur's Tomb*. But it is not in any index to Rossetti's poems that you will find these names. They are the titles of three of his pictures—pictures which Morris purchased—studied—absorbed—and then—repeated in verse.

It is absolutely typical. It may be said at once that Morris took, and could take, nothing from his poets but their pictures. As incapable as a child of "fundamental brainwork," he could only seize what he saw: thought itself had to be made sensible before he could grasp it; he was one of those (perhaps a more numerous race than we realize) who reason in pictures, who cannot absorb an idea until it is made into an ideogram—and all that was abstract in Rossetti's work, all that was intellectual, speculative, ethereal, psychological, flowed through his more primitive fingers like an empty wind. But, for this incapacity (which has in it perhaps the germ of a wise instinct, a refusal to see validity in anything that cannot take a vivid form—an involuntary recognition of the law of truth and beauty) he was compensated by the possession of an inordinate sensual avidity—and of an insatiable power, in especial, of sucking up sense-impressions through the eye and storing them with absolute security. This,[1]

[1] His biographer tells us, as "characteristic of his extraordinary eye and extraordinary memory," that he saw the Church of

indeed, may be called his distinguishing gift, the deciding element in his personality. It was upon its exercise that all his later activities were based; it both fed their scope and ruled their direction. It furnished him (as we shall see) with his philosophy both of art and of life, it was the source of all his desires and ideals; it gave him his fecundity and his facility as a designer; it was the fountain that fed the chains of still pools he called his "tales." And it was certainly by its alchemy that the new magic in *Guenevere* was acquired. For it enabled him to pillage all the poets without plagiarizing them, to copy Keats and Coleridge and Browning and Tennyson, as well as Malory and Froissart and Chaucer, without uttering one audible echo, and to give to a simple cento of their work the effect of "something entirely new, founded on nothing previous." Whenever their verse crystallized into vision it caught in his mind in coloured clusters like netted precious stones; all the rest—music, metaphysic, intellectual vehicle—poured through unheeded. He stole the little landscapes reflected in the foam that hung and shook from the leaping fountain of Shelley's work; but of the spirit that tossed and sustained it, even of the living water itself, he captured, he could capture, nothing. He took the castles that rose—all too rarely—on the clouds that Coleridge's intellect drew out of the air; and left the irresolute wrack behind. He stripped

Minster in Thanet when he was eight years old, and that "fifty years later, never having seen the church in the interval, he described it in detail from that recollection." We are also told how, in the days of the Firm, when they were manufacturing big church windows in premises disproportionately cramped, "his amazing eye and memory for colours enabled him to achieve the impossible: *he could pass all the parts of a large window one by one before the light and never lose sight of the general tone of the colours or of the relation of one part to another.*"

the frescoes from the walls of Tennyson's "Palace of Art" and used them as real places and people; but the moral strains to which the Palace uprose, the polite debates about the infinities conducted inside it, all drained, not undesirably, away. The description did not even need to be direct. It might be merely the remote end of a metaphor: he could still snap it neatly off, lop it free from its stem, leaving nothing of the thought or emotion that gave birth to it except the ineradicable physical stains on its texture. He saw similes as solid things; and such a casual touch as this, a side-glance through the shuttered lines of one of Rossetti's thickening dramas—

> But else, 'twas at the dead of noon,
> Absolute silence; all,
> From the raised bridge and guarded sconce
> To green-clad places of pleasaunce
> Where the long lake was white with swans—

provides him with a place he can enter and explore and afterwards patiently plan out for us (with an effect how different!) in such a careful inventory as this:—

> Midways of a wallèd garden,
> In the happy poplar land,
> Did an ancient castle stand,
> With an old knight for a warden.
>
> Across the moat the fresh west wind
> In very little ripples went;
> The way the heavy aspens bent
> Towards it, was a thing to mind.
>
> The painted drawbridge over it
> Went up and down with gilded chains.
> 'Twas pleasant in the summer rains
> Within the bridge-house there to sit.

There were five swans that ne'er did eat
The water weeds, for ladies came
Each day, and young knights did the same,
And gave them cakes and bread for meat.

They had a house of painted wood,
A red roof gold-spiked over it,
Wherein upon their eggs to sit
Week after week. . . .

It is a country as actual to him as Essex—for it is constructed only of such materials as his five senses had encountered; of anything in the fabric of the original region which they could not touch and test, he had remained quite unaware. "My business in life," he wrote in one of the earnest letters of his youth, "is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another." Had he written "other men's dreams" it would have been the perfect definition of his work.

Groping through all literature thus rudely—reading, so to say, by touch—he achieved a kind of infallible filtration, and sifted, out of verse and prose and pictures far disparted, an element common to them all. From sagas and from fairy-tales, from Grimm as from Rossetti, he raked brilliant solids only, all akin; and so could mix them with impunity, towers from this and knights from that: setting, for example, (in *The Chapel*) a figure out of Malory moving securely in a landscape skimmed off the mirror of *The Lady of Shalott*. Before he can feel that he has really captured the emotion, the idea, before he can feel certain that it is safely and legibly printed on his page, he must weight it with shape and substance, translate it into terms of "gold, marble, purple — brilliance, solidity, colour." Speech is made a muscular, rather than a mental, process—something to be seen as well as heard—a

trooping of palpable words. "See my breast rise, cries the Queen—

> "Like waves of purple sea as here I stand,
> And how my hands are moved in wonderful wise.
>
> Yea also, at my full heart's strong command,
> *See through my long throat how the words go up*
> *In ripples to my mouth.*"

He must measure the passage of time in terms of blossoms and primary earthly appearances before he feels it is comprehensibly registered, working it out on a primitive dial. To say—

> Until the leaves,
> Grown big upon the bushes of the walk
> East of the Palace-plesaunce, make it hard
> To see the minster therefrom,

is his laborious way of indicating an interval. Objects that might have seemed solid enough already he must make still more tangible. When he borrows, from a picture of Rossetti's, that stricken gesture of fingers pressed to face, of which the painter was so fond, and bestows it upon Guenevere—

> Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek—

he must make it yet more physical, adding:—

> *As though she had had there a shameful blow,*

confirming the bodily act, not by showing us its governing emotion, but with a picture of a second action, heavier and grosser and more violent than the first. And more than once, when he copies a painted image of the Christ to embody the idea of divinity, he must carry even this solidification a strange stage

further, turning the painted lips into real ones and the graven image into still more mortal flesh—practising anthropomorphism twice over:—

> "O Christ, that I may clasp your knees and pray
> I know not what; at any rate come now
> From one of many places where you are,
> Either in Heaven amid thick angel wings
> Or sitting on the altar strange with gems
> Or high up in the dustiness of the apse. . . .
> So I may keep you there, your solemn face
> And long hair even-flowing on each side
> *Until you love me well enough to speak,*
> *And give me comfort; yea, till o'er your chin*
> *And cloven red beard the great tears roll down . . .*"

—the addition of the bodily elements, it may be noted once more, actually dissolving the sense of reality it was meant to secure, hurrying us into the circle of hallucination.

VII

And always, oddly aiding this process, there was his callous indifference to mere words. This illiteracy helped him doubly. For one thing, it enabled him to plunge clean through the paper and seize the actual object described. When you or I or any other reader or writer sees such a scrap of essential poetry as this:—

> A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
> All garlanded with carven imageries,
> Of fruits and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
> And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
> Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes
> As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
> And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
> And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
> A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings—

the joy we gain is something inseparable from these particular epithets, drawn up in just these ranks; and the ripe, muffled padding, as of velvet feet, which the *d*'s and *m*'s make up and down the lines (*dyes, dim, splendid, deep-damask'd, diamonded, device*), and the double meanings which merge and blend, with such a sumptuous deepening of the general richness, in such luxuriously ambiguous words as *diamonded* and *damask*, all melt into the glow of the picture itself—perhaps even blur it a little, so that its details grow dim, as they would in reality, fainting into one warm, delicious suffusion. But all that mattered to Morris, all he perceived and enjoyed, was the stained-glass window itself and the intricate carving. Just as, in his later life, when he was making such windows in reality, he could pick up in swift succession each of the tiny panes in a great rose window and carry all their relations massed clearly in his mind, so here he caught out of the words the exact casement Keats thought of—valuing the description solely for the fullness and clearness with which it supplied him with this luxurious raw material. And, as with Keats, so with all the other great describers, through whose visions, as a voluptuous undergraduate, he went greedily foraging for scenery and sensations. "He understood Tennyson's greatness in a manner that we [his fellow-undergraduates], who were mostly absorbed by the language, could not share," says Canon Dixon: "*he understood it as if the poems represented substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them.* It was this substantial view that afterwards led him to admire ballads, real ballads, so highly." . . . For "admire," read "enjoy."

And this childlike indifference to "the language" aided his pilferings still further by making it practically impossible to follow up and identify his spoil.

All the traceable epithets and idioms, the clinging cadences and lucky turns of speech, that twined round the original image, seeming an essential part of its tissue, tumbled off as he tore it away. He retained nothing but the visible object, brushed clear of all the music that conjured it: the poem was melted down and carried off as virgin vision. That very casement of Madeline's, one now recollects, was actually one of the objects he utilized. The coloured light that splashes these pages of *Guenevere* drew much of its splendour from those dyes: yet in all that stanza of Keats there is not one cardinal word that Morris himself ever used. He thrust through the writing to the solid substance itself, to the gules and the traceried stone—stacked these in the Aladdin's cave of his memory, a pirate's hoard of similar loot, where the solid residuum of all the world's romances—Gothic, Arabian, Norse—lay stored indistinguishably with sense-impressions gathered in Essex and Oxford and Bruges—figures from missals, designs from old Herbals, faces from smooth Flemish portraits, carvings and colours from stained church windows and tombs; and then, when the time came to use it, sat down before it, wedged where it lay, and to the mechanical beat of some simple borrowed metre, set ticking at his elbow like a metronome, strung his monosyllables stolidly together, one by one, like a man making a copy in mosaic, till he had mapped the carven casement out afresh:—

> Because it seemed a dwelling for a queen,
> No belfry for the swinging of great bells,
> No bolt or stone that ever crush'd the green
> Shafts, amber and rose walls, no soot that tells
> Of the Norse torches burning up the roofs
> On the flower-carven marble could I see. . . .

And there you have another of these mysterious transformations being actually, visibly, performed![1]

VIII

And how much more than these elfin refractions does this diagnosis of the process not explain! It explains the blind gait of the words, that seemed to be stumbling and groping beneath the burden of a meaning too inordinate for speech, but that are now seen to be palsied by nothing more dreadful than inexperience; and the vivid incoherence of the narrative—distressed, as we thought, by the same wordless desire—clotting and huddling tensely into those hieroglyphs of knights and queens and painted moons—a system of signs profounder and more elemental than language—is seen to be only the result of a kind of incomplete larceny. Made of a solid crust of massed images, fused by none of the solving vapours of narrative, verse of this graphic sort was bound to present a surface full of fissures, scored with gaps in the thought, unbridged

[1] It is worth while noting, too, how extraordinarily this plodding tick-tock of the metre, pursuing its way imperturbably, quite indifferent to the human stresses of the speaker's voice or the natural modulations of the story, actually produces an effect of incommunicable tensions and mysterious significances by tugging the skin of the verse away from the simple underlying meaning. If the reader's voice obeys the injunctions of the rhythm, it often puts an emphasis on unimportant words—on words, certainly, that had no special meaning for Morris; and the result of this disparity between their sound-value and their sense-value is a strange acquisition of mystical momentousness, as though they meant infinitely more than they said. But in *Jason*, on the other hand, written when Morris was a conscious craftsman, precisely the contrary method is followed, and instead of the story going on steadily it is continually being held up and thinned out, in order to fit the movement of the verse—with, of course, a distinct lowering of the dramatic pitch and a general dilution of the emotional interest.

by abstractions, across which the reader's mind has to fling itself desperately, leaping from picture to picture —actually displaying, as well as seeming to watch, the galvanic conduct of a mind fevered by strong vision. Nor was it less innocently inevitable, nor less unconscious and unsought, that the strained figures stooping in these pictures should seem weighted with a sacramental purpose or to move with the rigour of ecstatics; for it was out of missals that many of them came, it was from painted books and devout pictures that the faces of these adulterous queens and spell-bound lovers were taken, and in their angularity alone, if in nothing deeper, they bear the marks of the fastings and vigils which stiffened the monkish fingers that made them. The white face of Jehane and the rigid sword-grip of Sir Guy might well recall the lips and hands of anchorites, for it was by the hands of actual anchorites that they were originally carved on old tombs.

And finally, whilst their parched speech was the result of one kind of inexperience — Morris's own primitive technique, and their constricted gestures the result of another, an actual historical innocence, the awkwardness of the youth of the world; whilst the sense of subtle spiritual strain is directly due to a simple boyish liking for bright pictures, and the effect of an uncannily intimate comprehension of recondite sexual moods to a naïve contentment with art instead of life; so the lapidary brightness of the result, that seemed to testify so surely to a state of abnormal, almost nightmare, apprehensiveness, was in reality but the outcome of an open-air pleasure in a sort of sunny solidity. The more muscularly young Morris pressed upon his medium, delighting in its growing distinctness, the more strangely did it seem to start up from the page and accost us with the brittle colours of delirium. Just as those contemporary P.R.B. pictures, painted by the band of hearty

youths who were his friends, were strung up to the intensity of parables, invested with a kind of hushed holiness, by a mere dogged attention to detail, a pedestrian transcription of every stem and stain and stone, so do these graphic lyrics seem to grow more breathless and mystical the more precisely and materialistically they were made. One of the best of those pictures, burdened (as it seems) with presage, is that simple gardening bonfire scene, painted by the happy young athlete Millais, known as "Autumn Leaves." By a process not dissimilar, in a spirit just as joyous, this book of borrowed brightness, this heap of garnered spoil, was invested with the same piercing iridescence, seemed to wear "the evanescent and intangible grace of a new beginning in art," and, in spite of its actual autumnal sensuousness, seems to thrill and tingle with the tidings of a strange new spiritual spring.

## IX

Is the whole thing, then, one immense, amazing "spoof," and are we, the solemn readers, with our reverential ecstasies, no better than a row of mawkish gulls? By the Heels of Apollo—no! Who are we to say that the work a man's hand does in defiance of his neatly-framed intentions is not obeying far profounder laws than any that could be codified by that prim bureaucrat his brain? Consider the cold scientific character of the verses thus involuntarily made. Composed of clamped metaphors, a solid crust of imagery, might they not be expected, on that account alone, to contain a keener, purer magic than poetry that is mostly matrix, a bed and vehicle for single gems? Though we scarcely ever admit it, checked by a rather winning sort of shame, afraid of being found too trivial, it is actually for the sake of these concentrated pictures, these little pools of vision, that

we treasure and ponder poetry as we do; and when we chip off, to use as amulets, such crystals as

> Brightness falls from the air:

or

> Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
> Stains the white radiance of eternity:

or

> Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn:

choosing always a token for the eye, never a mere tune for the ear or an abstract text for the mind, we are making admission of our dim belief in their special virtue, our recognition that they are a kind of quintessence. Sunbright epitomes at their lowest, at their best they are crystallizations, formed in some intenser fire of energy, of perceptions too pure and fine for the standard statements of reasoned thought: and to handle them, even apart from their setting, is to receive and be adjusted to the power that flowed up to this supreme point in the poem. They are the bright precipitates of the poet's mood, coins that concentrate the wealth of a landscape, bearing much the same relation to the rest of the poem that the poem itself does towards the spreading spaces of the poet's life. Condensations of condensations—is it too much to imagine that poetry compact of them, built solely of images, may be, if not actually a superior summary, a final and yet finer concentration, then at least quite delectably free from alloy, a strangely precious new manner of writing? Admit even that and you grant *Guenevere* legitimacy: it falls purely into place—clear descendant of *Christabel*—immensely, unexpectedly, *de race!* To talk of this schoolboy creating a superb ultimate symbol—taking from

Froissart the pure essence of our chivalry, and the focus of another faith from Malory — the minted emblems of our simpler moods from the ballads and of our more complex desires from Shelley, Coleridge, Keats—and then welding all together into one inclusive major myth, would doubtless be to run a theory too far—a stupid, academic weakness; but to fail to see in the later course of English verse a steady struggle to gain exactly this condition of pure symbol, to rid itself of all the old alloys of message or injunction, is to be sceptical and unscientific both: an even deadlier fault, if possible, than pedantry. Put it, roughly, that what was once the mere body of verse, good to carry counsel, is now regarded as its soul; that what was once held to be its all-important burden is now looked on only as a pedestal: then the modern cry is "Dissolve the pedestal." Relieved long ago of her earliest office, that of a vessel for lore, knowledge, messages—a smoothly rounded and moulded receptacle, almost physical, in which precepts could be pleasantly transmitted or preserved, Poetry only lately completed another stage of her enfranchisement by transferring bodily to the new faculty of Fiction her other original duty of teller of tales; and now, in our own time, the chief task has become to remove the last film and trace of rhetoric, to thin away the old appeal to the ear, until at last even the tune may become optical, intellectual, too fine for the slower sense of sound, and the vase be finally dissolved. It was of this purification of "the lyrical cry," this attempt to shake metaphor clear of its moral and capture the foam without the wave, that Rossetti used to dream when he spoke of "a condensed and hinted beauty"; and it was towards this too that Verlaine with his lures, and the "Symbolists" with their elaborate machinery, and the lamenting voices that are still pleading sadly for beauty in Ireland, and

the calamitous young dreamers, poor Dowson and Thompson, who sought an earlier heraldry still in our London, and used religion as a rosary to summon dreams beyond her own reach—were all in their fashion subtly working. Some of these men came after our schoolboy, but their debt to him is well marked: without Morris, a very different Yeats. But from those who went before him he is distinguished by his amazing innocence of all intellectual tactics, by his beautiful inability to make the subtle mistake of the Symbolists and substitute (as they did) a philosophy of letters for one of life, a ladder in place of the pedestal, a silver wire for the old simple stem. Young poets before Morris had studied their predecessors; some even had decided on this sort of filtration; but none had done both so unconsciously and illiterately, with such a complete absence of limiting theory. Morris alone, with his simple boy's heart and his giant frame, with no care for philosophy and little ear for verbal music, had blessed innocence enough to walk unscathed to the treasure and then the strength to crush its contents into one crystal. A cleverer giant would have turned aside to argue, a more sophisticated one would have been tempted by wise or useful alloys; a less lusty simpleton would merely have made an absolutely perfect anthology. Morris turned his anthology into an alphabet, using each of its items as a letter. He sent his great voice pealing out in a song that used solid poems for its notes. He walked the waves without noticing them, sustained by his perfect trust in art, intent only on the pretty colours in the spray; and he picked these up because he wanted them, and bound them together in a bow, and carved corridors and climbing stairways and enchanted rooms in the heart of them, all because he was as a little child. No, when we felt we were "entering Noah's rainbow and being made companions

of the images of wonder," we were not being so absurdly deceived. An abstract of earlier art, a distillation of old dreams, *Guenevere* does hang above the ranging tides of verse, a chord of essential colour, at once a completion and a pledge.

And sweeping out of and surpassing this narrow technical legitimacy, this proof of the book's place in letters, there now comes the sense of a larger validity, a profounder conformity, a fulfilment of something more lasting than a literary tradition. The ultimate basis of all these queer involuntary virtues, as we have seen, is just the fact that the book is the work of a boy writing with the creative energy of a man; and it is this union of the strong decisiveness of manhood with the special dreams and limitations of youth that gives it a right to rank as something much more independent than a link in a chain of development. *The Defence of Guenevere* will retain its magic, one suggests, even after its descendants have carried poetry on into clearer kingdoms. For *The Defence* fulfils demands that are immune from development, recurrent as the spring, as stable as the body's need for food. It is the perfect embodiment of the dim desires of adolescence; it is a clear and ringing definition of the longings and the dreams which come before articulation, which had hitherto seemed bound up with dumbness, bone of its bone, dissolving always at the touch of that experience which brings the trick of words, the craft and equipment of speech. Feeding his own desires with his more than adult energy, this glorious undergraduate made a volume that might very well be called The Book of Youth, a complete response to all those "romantic" appetites which every clean-drawn stripling feels, but which none is able to expound. Nor is it likely that the formula which Morris manufactured will prove a temporary solace, soon outmoded. It was in the arts of all the centuries that he sought his

special spoil, and he ransacked the romance of every clime. Youth hounding him on pitilessly, his great body answering nobly, he hammered out a kind of Volapük, discovered the common element in eastern tales and northern sagas, and wrote out the answer he wanted in a kind of universal language, a picture-Esperanto that may very well prove specially impregnable to time.

Youth lashed him on—and it was this fell urgency, finally, that forced him to crush and concentrate as never again, and to give this book the poignancy that makes even maturity regard it as his masterpiece. Youth is full of fears, sees dangers in dubiety; youth dreads the dark, and hungers for a reassuring vehemence. In the strength of young Morris's grip at this time there is a little of the violence of terror. He dreaded and he longed, as young men do, the unknown couched in the blackness all about them: he clutched all he touched and riveted his gains, making every step a conquest. It was in this concentrated way that *Guenevere* was written, in a narrow circle as of torch-light in a forest. And it was the sunny cessation of these tremors and fears, it was the termination of all the special tortures which Youth applies to its vassals, that finally dissolved the fruitful spell. Here, indeed, we do reach something genuinely discomfiting. *Guenevere* is beautiful because it was written in a kind of darkness; *Jason* is dull because it was born in the sun. Our rainbow, it seems, required a background of storm. These colours owe their brightness to heart's blood.

## X

For *The Defence of Guenevere*, compared with *The Life and Death of Jason*, was really written on the rack. "It was an anxious and a difficult time," says his biographer of the undergraduate years when some

of the best of it was done: Morris grew "moody and irritable, brooded much by himself, and lost a good deal of his old sweetness and affection of manner." He was suffering immoderately from all the maladies of youth —its violence and vagueness, its energy and innocence, its healthy hunger for physical beauty and its haunting sense that beauty was a sin. With more than a grown man's vitality, he knew far less of the actual world than the everyday urchin. Built on the lines of a Berserker, he regarded the Heir of Redclyffe as a thoroughly practical model and guide. His body was a cage of burning energies that could find no adequate outlet, and as they prowled and stormed and tore him he blamed himself for a fancied weakness of character. "The instability of character which he found, or thought he found, in his own character became for the time acute . . . he was subject to strange fluctuations of mood." Destined for the Church, he had deeply wounded his mother by deciding not to take orders and by solemnly dedicating himself to architecture instead. And now, duly articled, Rossetti strode tyrannously into his life, ordered him to become a painter, and he had to wound her again by obeying. He was a rebel who wanted only to do right; one duty defeated another, and desire warred with both; art took the place of reality, and he tried to spend his huge strength in the shadow-kingdom he had made out of pictures and poems and old tales. He overworked desperately, almost hysterically. He was desperately, cruelly in love. And all about him, a beautiful wall between him and the real nineteenth century, blocking the normal channels of relief, lay the lackadaisically earnest Oxford of the fifties, an Oxford as adolescent as himself, and the capital of a solemn, sentimental, profoundly inexperienced England. Socially and intellectually the hour and the atmosphere exactly matched and heightened the exaggerated fevers and abysmal glooms of

youth. Fresh conditions were being tested by a formula that had suddenly grown hollow and unreal, and energetic minds sailed out into a noble emptiness, an exalted indignation or sorrow that they failed to see was at bottom only an unconscious cowardice and shirking. There were melodramatic oppositions everywhere. You were scientist or saint. Ruskin and Carlyle stalked and darkly prophesied. Reality was turned into a menace, something to be scolded and shunned. The sun of a setting religion, burning through the strange, new clouds of factory-smoke that were beginning to drift over England, turned them into a sinister pall.

Now compare these hectic personal conditions with Morris's mode of life a little later. *The Defence* was published in 1858; *The Life and Death of Jason* ten years later. In the interval he had married, had built himself a house, had laid out his life like a garden, and had settled down into a snug social philosophy. This philosophy was as simple as his mind. "People, be good," was the pith of young Ruskin's first and following sermons: Morris's whole ethic was even simpler: "People, be happy." That is the precept, framed precisely so, that reappears again and again in his familiar letters; it was the boyish core to all his grown-up efforts and creeds. "People, be happy —so that I can be happy too," was the centre of his socialism; "Art is man's expression of his joy in labour," was his comfortable theory of his own task of creation. As for the nature of this felicity, the kind of thing that constituted human happiness, this had been defined for him beyond escape. beautifully coloured and balanced, by the life we have seen him living. To an extent far greater than is commonly admitted, most men unconsciously manufacture their working philosophy, and their practical ambitions and ideals, out of chance pictures and memories, haunting

scraps of description heard in their childhood, that take secret root and slowly collect mental adjuncts; but for a man like Morris—so specially incapable of abstract speculation, hedged about in an unreal hush by his father's wealth, and abnormally capable of turning descriptions into solid kingdoms, where he could pace and live contentedly—it was inevitable that his philosophy, his view of life, his sense of its possibilities and perfections, should be formed out of books and pictures, out of exactly the material which we saw him crushing together to make into his first poetry. To speak of him, as the fashion is now, as a mediævalist born,[1] a strayed soul from the thirteenth century, is pretty perhaps, but, surely, sentimental and unsound; he was in essence but a mass of undetermined energy surging with predilections for pure Comeliness, Symmetry, Law, and if he had been born, like Burne-Jones, in a Birmingham thoroughfare, and sent to a nail factory or brassfounder's, he might have used his great strength and sound instincts to straighten up the social tangle into which machinery at first plunged us; or at least have wrought reality into a pattern in the shape of modern books and plays. But he was bred in a moated grange, islanded out of the clamour, on that queer, unreal, middle kingdom which middle-class wealth alone can make—diligently detached from the town on the one hand, yet having no share in the immemorial feudal mechanism of the soil on the other; he was educated on Gothic architecture, ancient peace, romances and missals, a course sustained, by happy accident, through his solitary schooldays in Savernake; and it was out of the lovely elements thus provided that he sheathed his desires and gave them the dogmatic body that we know. He came to believe that

[1] "The love of the Middle Ages was born in him," says Mr. Mackail.

the essential nature of man was something as simple and courteous, as calm and contented, as decoratively lusty as the smooth figures he found, made proud and perfect by Time or tender craftsmen, in the pictures he accumulated in his Aladdin's cave; he felt that all the rest was but accident and distortion, and that the modern world had but to shake itself in order to shed the shabby husks it had acquired and step out in the old stately simplicity. Perhaps he was right. The faces mirrored in the arts, down the ages, may indeed be the divine archetypes, clear projections of the ideals we all dimly desire, and to which we will therefore one day assuredly attain. But the point to be recognized now is that his belief was based on no study or knowledge of actual human nature or human history, that it was born out of mirrors, three removes from reality, in a cavern more phantasmal than Plato's. And thus, when he spoke of happiness, it was a specially pellucid sort of happiness that he meant. His idea of human felicity was something rainless and rhythmical, strong without restlessness, refined but never subtle: a Lotos-land peopled by Lancelots who had taken pastoral lessons in Arcadia. It seems ironic, perhaps, that such an immaterial fabric should solidify into something placidly earthly; but that was inevitable: it was sensuously gathered and was bound to result in a kind of radiant materialism. But the irony grows distinctly keen when we discover, as we are now compelled to do, that it was the purely poetic source of this conception of life that spoiled the poetry produced in its name.

For the poetry that flowered in the soft sun of such a system was simply bound to be smooth and mild. It had to be doubly indulgent: a source of simple happiness to the reader on the one hand, a joyous pastime for the writer on the other. Morris wanted to write

poetry, for his own content, but to do it serenely he had to feel it was contenting other people too, that it was performing a soothing social service; and he found this justification in the fancied power of verse to soften the harsh outlines of the only unearthly Power he was forced to admit into his mental kingdom—the Power, I mean, of Death.[1] His own childlike terror of Death was one of his most conspicuous traits; and in poetry he pretended that he found a double panacea—a power to act, first as an opiate, soothing the fears of the living, and then as a preservative, embalming and renewing the dead. These were the duties he liked to feel *The Earthly Paradise* was fulfilling: of a lullaby drowning the dread approaching footsteps, and of a spell to recall the departed:—

> Past ruin'd Ilion Helen lives,
> Alcestis rises from the shades;
> Verse calls them forth; 'tis verse that gives
> Immortal youth to mortal maids.

Then, soothed by this sophistry, he could turn contentedly to his task and indulge himself still further. To have lashed himself, fought for a strange poignancy, struggled and burned in the throes of creative desire, would have been to have broken the precepts of his own kingdom absurdly; to write smoothly and easily,

[1] "From the first he was afflicted by a pagan fear of death, or rather by the feeling that death, sure to come at last and possible at any moment, made life seem meaningless. He writes of it, now and again in his poetry, like an animal cursed with foreknowledge; it was a fact that he could neither explain nor forget. So there was always this dark shadow to the sunlight of his labours; and, however easily he might live, he could not be at ease when he thought of dying."—Mr. A. Clutton-Brock in the latest and by far the best of the books about Morris's work, *William Morris: His Work and Influence*, published in the Home University Library (1s.), in June 1914.

to make versification a sunny aid to his enjoyment of the visible world and the untroubled play of his senses (which was the secret sum of his desires) was established as his honest duty. And so he sent Jason and his Wanderers gathering loot for him, founding Kelmscotts even fairer than his own—tasting through their lips the royal wines and fruits that lay beyond his physical reach; and he invented a way of making verses that should interfere not at all with the directer joys of the day—a smiling mixture of tapestry-work and low music. Surely no poet ever wrote so much with such a small outlay of fatigue. "All that talk about inspiration is nonsense, I tell you flat," he used to say. "If a man can't turn out an epic while working at a loom he had better give up the job." He never re-wrote, never filed or hammered or compressed. He simply sat down in a roomful of friends and drove ahead, reams at a time—breaking off, as often as not, as his manuscripts show, in the middle of a line—filling in those odd hours of the day that might otherwise have lacked their meed of fun. The act of creation for him was simply a jolly recreation: he would not allow it to become anything more. He composed in order to compose himself. He resolutely refused to enter those dark inner chambers of the mind where the last efforts of the imagination take place in torment, and the supreme revelations are received. He never wrought himself into a fever or indulged in any spiritual wrestlings; rather, he used his art as a source of relief, to relax the pressure of real life. He dug, he dyed, he fished—he cooked and carved and printed; he built a working-model of his mediæval utopia, copying the contents of his cave in actual stone and timber, and lived therein, with due uproariousness, the life assigned to one of his own ruddy and broad-browed heroes; and then, when the day was done, or his arms grew tired, he simply sat down with

his pen, brought the sun back, and soaked his happy senses all afresh:—

> So there they lay until the second dawn
> Broke fair and fresh o'er glittering glade and lawn;
> Then Jason rose, and did on him a fair
> Blue woollen tunic, such as folk do wear
> On the Magnesian cliffs, and at his thigh
> An iron-hilted sword hung carefully;
> And on his head he had a russet hood;
> And in his hand two spears of cornel wood . . .
> And so stept forth into the sunny morn.

The deduction seems difficult to avoid. The flatness and diffuseness of *Jason* are the marks of his new jovial materialism, the measure of his devotion, both in his work and outside it, to the creature comforts of the earth. *His happiness was the price of our betrayal.* It might be urged, indeed, that the work done on this ample scale, these lyrics as large as life and stories that spread like a plain, are meat only for men as gigantic as himself, too big for our precious modern appetite, with its pigmy craving for quintessences and epitomes; that the time will come when we too will prefer tapestries to tiny pictures, and epics to little edgy tales. And there is more than mercy in the view. If *The Defence of Guenevere* is the book of youth, then *The Earthly Paradise* and his endless tales in prose may perhaps be called the reading for mankind's middle age. But we are manikins still, we have not yet reached our maturity; and to grow we must be fed. *Jason* for us lacks vitality; *Guenevere* spurs and stings;—and so Morris too, whom we had grown to think of as the radiant exception, whom Mr. Yeats has called "the happiest of the poets," joins with Keats the consumptive and Shelley the outcast, with Blind Harry and Homer and Milton, and all the countless maimed ministers

of song, to remind us that birth involves travail, and service crucifixion, that the Grail is only granted to those who have suffered vigils and fastings, and that he who would bring us a little nearer to an earthly paradise must wander in the wilderness himself. "Art is the expression of man's joy"—but the labour involves laceration. He who would save our lives must lose his own.

But do not let us end too sadly! That large deduction, it is true, is damping: we would all so much rather believe that poetry is just printed song, purified laughter; and Morris's own teaching and the tradition he established had almost buoyed us into the belief. But at the same time we must not magnify our losses. No man can defy his dæmon for ever, his instincts will discover a ruse, and the strange journeys Morris undertook to Iceland, the twilit moods they aroused, the emotional travail they cost him, were really, if one had only time to tell the tale, but the elaborate subterfuge the Spirit of Letters adopted in order to drive him out into the darkness for a little, there to gather the material which he of all men could use, and ultimately to produce, strengthened by his weariness, his second great masterpiece *Sigurd*. And even in the meantime, while that plot is brewing, we have some other compensations. If *Jason* seems limp, we have the lusty picture of his own life for a make-weight; precisely because he refused to produce a second *Guenevere*, he lived on a scale, with a gusto, that kindles the heart like wine and song.

And, lastly, we have, too, the very human satisfaction of knowing that he was most exquisitely punished for his traitorousness. Poetry took a sweet revenge. For the decorative dimness of his paradisiacal works (the result, as we have seen, of his uproariousness) was caught up as the Morris characteristic—copied

by a crew of dank disciples, dressed regardless—and trailed through the meadows of a laughter-loving world, to the accompaniment of rapt murmurs of his name. It is the choicest retribution. Hearty lover of solidity, of colours hot and strong, hearty hater of all subtleties and semitones, he came to be worshipped by the folk he most abhorred; and in a dim, green twilight, a numb anæmic purgatory, his memory had to sit listening to their praise. . . . And so we can end with honest laughter after all.

*Primitiæ: Essays in English Literature by students of the University of Liverpool*, 1912.

## WALT WHITMAN

MR. DE SELINCOURT has done it! He has written a whole book about Whitman[1] and never once called his man "the good grey poet." This has never been managed before. Cries of "camerado!" and of "allons!"—a general roisterous open-roadiness—have always hitherto been thought essential to Walt's welcome; for Criticism, despite its protests, has never, in its heart of hearts, felt entirely comfortable in the old boy's shirt-sleeved presence, and so, like a flustered host, has tried to hide its consternation and show its fine superiority to convention, by plunging ponderously about in a state of earnest joviality, pumping up a dreadful form of free-and-easiness. (Even young Stevenson's essay—he was very young when he wrote it—is an example of this upside-down snobbery: "the best-dressed young man in the Burlington Arcade," in all the brightness of his patent-leather periods pretending there to be a sort of simple sunbaked cowboy.)

But Mr. de Selincourt displays a subtler courtesy. Instead of trying to put his guest at ease by tearing his own collar off, he has surrounded the whole occasion with the stateliest forms and ceremonies. "Well, he looks like a man anyway," was Lincoln's testimonial to Walt, and every biographer has quoted it with pride. Mr. de Selincourt never mentions it; prefers to pay Whitman the compliment of treating

[1] *Walt Whitman: A Critical Study.* By Basil de Selincourt (Martin Secker).

him simply as an artist. "He set out to discover a means of direct personal appeal, capable of ranging from the levels of the merely conversational tone, familiar but always ardent, along the broad and copious lower slopes of vivid description and specification, and up the steps and steeps of impassioned argument and persuasion to those heights of prophetic ecstasy and assurance where speech itself is a song. And this he actually achieves." "The whole course of Whitman's life," he says again, "shows that he was at the furthest remove possible from the crude animal man, whose conduct he sometimes seems to glorify. He is, on the contrary, of the shy, brooding, impassioned, devotional type." "Among his greatest gifts is his command of the music of words, the freedom with which he can throw off phrases equally remarkable for their significance and for their beauty. His successes, and the fact that his successes include some of the longest and most audacious of his works, suffice to establish his power in conception and creation, and the equality of his touch as an executant." It is as a supreme virtuoso, then, a master musician, that Mr. de Selincourt receives him. And to the task of estimating his powers and measuring his performances he brings a critical apparatus more elaborate and sensitive than any I have seen employed since Arthur Symons valued Blake. It is with æsthetic spirometers and stethoscopes of the most beautiful fragility that he tests the lungs that let out the "barbaric yawp."

And he is perfectly right—that is exactly what we need. It clears the air of insincerity, it steadies all our nerves, it wipes away those agonizing grins; and it places us, probably for the very first time, in the perfect attitude for receiving the full force and swing of the man's extraordinary powers. And this isn't only because Whitman was of course, in reality, every bit as self-conscious as Byron, as incapable of impulsive-

ness as Poe; it is also because we readers are self-conscious souls too, because we are only natural in these matters when we are elaborately artful, quite incapable of properly appreciating poetry of any kind (but especially experimental poetry like Whitman's) unless we approach it with some sort of deliberation and ceremony, keying our senses up with some kind of ritual. The simpler the reader, the more artificial the process of perusal: but there probably isn't one of us yet, highly civilized though we are, with a brain convoluted sufficiently to enable him to enjoy a poem as naïvely as he does a sunset or a swim. Pretend that it isn't so—strike an elemental attitude—insist that the joy you get perusing Walt's democratic pages is as primitive and spontaneous as the natural pleasures which they praise—and you only produce a sad distortion, very damaging to the digestion, precisely as though you had practised mental tight-lacing, adopting a corset warranted to produce a natural shape.

And what makes this truer of *Leaves of Grass* than of almost any other book of verse, is the fact that, in spite of all their boasted barbarism, they are not atavistic at all, they are really a final product of culture. The grass is not prairie grass; it is that of immemorial lawns, following the lines of the soil with silken closeness, The figure is a fair one—for what these surging recitatives really sought to attain was simply a greater suppleness, flexibility, and responsiveness, than was allowed by the older modes of rigid bars. "I believe myself he chose his style because it was easy to write," said Stevenson, boyishly sentimental, clinging to his picture of a slapdash simplicity. But he was demonstrably wrong. The poems that Whitman wrote "easily" are not only immensely his worst, they are also the poems which employ conventional metres. One of his greatest

difficulties was to *avoid* established lilts, the old-fashioned music kept tapping at his brain, begging his thoughts to accept its assistance, offering them a ready-made road. He had to beat it back with his left hand, doggedly and desperately, whilst his right, often weary, was patiently encouraging the little new-born idea to grip and clutch. And sometimes he surrendered; when he lay weak and ill, crushed by the paralysis that was perhaps the result of his efforts in the war, he still tried gallantly to celebrate the great national occasions, fulfilling the duties of laureate—and it was then that the importunate echoes had their way. They may be heard, pathetically enough, cruelly misleading his weakened voice, at the very hour when he most longed for independence—the hour when Lincoln's death gave him his supreme opportunity and he strove to write our first exultant dirge. The result, "When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloomed," is still beautiful. There are lines in it that break nobly away, the tired head lifting itself proudly; but when all is said, the submissive couplet which closes it:

> Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul
> There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim,

comes to remind us that Whitman needed even all his immense strength to withstand the ready-made poetical and that his best music was the result of the exercise of indomitable self-denying will.

And the reader who wants to feel the full "urge and ardour" of that will must also be prepared for conscious effort: to ramp through *Leaves of Grass* with an easy animal avidity is only to succeed in making hay of them. To extract their full herbal value needs delicate handling—nor must we be afraid of imputing too much, of crediting the poet with

subtler tactics than he ever dreamed of, for it is only a display of such credulity that will win us permission to pass to the point where we can watch the tremendous manœuvres of the forces Walt unconsciously served. Let me give one instance of these benign admittances —a very simple one, but it will do—it is easier to summarize than those displayed by Mr. de Selincourt. Take any characteristic leaf, and then attempt, by close analysis, to trace the sensual, technical secret of its charm. You will find, almost invariably, that the source of its grip on the mind is a definite decorative contrast between some spray of lace-like detail, and a dim, vast, abstract wash which serves as background. Go far enough west, and you find yourself in the east —and it is a fact that this extravagantly Occidental art of Whitman's has often a quality completely Oriental.

> Low-hanging moon!
> What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?
> O, it is the shape, the shape of my mate!
> O moon, do not keep her from me any longer.

That stanza (from "Out of the Cradle") might be a word-for-word translation of a Japanese *hokku*. This again (a complete poem) might be a description of a drawing by Hiroshige:

> Lo, the unbounded sea,
> On its breast a ship starting, spreading all sails, carrying all her moonsails.
> The pennant is flying aloft as she speeds, she speeds so stately—below emulous waves press forward,
> They surround the ship with shining curving motion and foam.

Now, focussing on this single quality, make a list of its occurrences. Instantly, you detect it supplying the virtue of poems you had thought of as totally dissimilar.

It is the presence, for instance, of precisely this contrast that gives this famous tag its special thrill:

> In this broad earth of ours,
> Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,
> Enclosed and safe within its central heart,
> Nestles the seed perfection.

It is this again that gives their poignancy to his many pictures of sea-margins ("On the beach at night alone"), with their small sharp figures thrown up against the empty waste. It was the same decorative principle that attracted him so often to nocturnes—he loved to punctuate the infinite night with sprays of stars. And it dawns on you, as you dog it this way, that it emerges yet again in his very choice of words—that the apparent discord of the astounding style which he called "melange mine own," is really at bottom but another variation of the self-same device of making a pattern of the particular on the universal. His favourite words in that medley—his *omnes, omnes*! his *ensemble*, his *en masse*—what are they but attempts to concentrate that contrast by describing the universal in a patois, locking up the infinite and the local in one word? Terms mystical and terms medical—the august and the intimate—words barbarous and words Frenchified—words lusty, words elegant—phrases from Bibles and bills of lading—clauses legal and lyrical—their cheek-by-jowl jostle through his catalogues and orisons is but an endless repetition of this trick of general and precise. Just as with the opening line of a poem he will sweep in a vast spread of plain and sky:

> I hear America singing,

and then, with the next, begin to diaper all that impersonal space with homeliest detail:

> The varied carols I hear—
> The woodcutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, the delicious singing of the mother, or the girl sewing and washing. . . .

—so, too, with some single word of invocation, something apostrophic or oracular, he will fill the mind with a proud vague sense of signs and wonders, and then, with the next, a word of graphic idiom, will lift clear against this brooding grandeur some object tiny and familiar, so that it holds the sight invested with a strange significance, like a little figure made momentous by appearing on a skyline—dignified generously, not contemptuously derided, by the measureless curtains of empty air beyond.

And of course it was precisely such an ennoblement that Whitman desired for the men he pitted against the immensities.

> One's self I sing, the simple separate person
> Yet utter the world democratic, the world *en masse*.

All his work was an endeavour to make the individual feel momentous; remembering that now, is there not something deeply stirring in the sight of that moral message being translated involuntarily into the special terms of graphic decoration? This unconscious unity and harmony, an actual inability to betray themselves, is indeed the final mark of men of genius; but it was probably not in Whitman we would expect it to be found. Perfectly homogeneous, however, in spite of its mad "melanges" and mixtures, is the entire mass of his work. "I am large," he said; "I contain multitudes," and the line that bound them was unbroken. Nothing is more absorbing, more exciting, than to trace these infallible correspondences. I know of no better stimulant or aid to such experiments and researches than this remarkable book.

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